

Falling in Love with the Villainess

— Akuyaku Reijo Ni Koi Wo Shite —

**- Volume 2 -
In the Game – Academy Arc**

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[Hikki no Mori translations]

Chapter 8

Event: The season of encounters

Spring season. Although this was the most hectic and important period for the teachers of the Royal Academy, the newly admitted students had resurfacing thoughts of everything feeling anew — At least that's how it was supposed to be every year.

Particularly this year, in the faculty room, the teachers put in charge of first years were focusing their grave expressions on the faculty leader.

"How did the things end up like this?"

"What are you saying now, you should've expected this outcome all along, shouldn't you?"

Although the faculty leader was scolding the grumbling homeroom teacher, in reality he himself felt like complaining too.

"I know that, but I still can't help complaining!"

"I feel the same."

"However, to be in charge of those "first years" that only arrive once in decades..."

"Haa..."

Although it was already obvious, the thing making the teachers rack their brains was the issue of the first years.

This year's roster of incoming students has been completed. It looked like the period of suffering that was said to only come once every several decades was approaching with the outstanding lineup.

The first person of the list would be the crown prince himself, his highness Arnold Highland. In other words, the future king. In addition, there also were the younglings of the marquesses.

The heir of House Aquamea , viscount Lancelot Minister.

The second daughter of House Fatillas , Charlotte Lanchester.

Finally, the heir of the House Windhill , viscount Vincent Woodville.

The gathering of the three marquess houses. Together with the crown prince, it was the splendor of the three heirs. The gathering of the children of the most influential people had happened in the past as well.

“If the other Houses get married, then even our House would!” “If news got out about a pregnancy in the other House, then all the more our House would make one happen as well!” such small rivalries had tended to happen naturally.

This usually resulted, with the younglings being close in age, in the so called period of suffering that only arrived once per decades and which the teachers feared the most.

With all that said, all of them being concentrated in one year was not really that rare.

Although the Royal Academy welcomed the influential younglings with much delight, deep inside they were greatly perplexed. The social status of the Academy’s staff, even the principal, was below them.

That itself was fine. The concerns regarding social status happened every year. The problem was when the offspring of the most influential people clashed between themselves. It would bring heaps of trouble and if such a thing indeed happened, what could be their course of action?

“Let’s try checking the roster again. If it comes to the crown prince, there is no problem about his temperament. As expected of his majesty the future king, how praiseworthy.”

The teacher in charge reported about the prince, while holding documents in hand.

“Do you believe in that?”

In contrast, another teacher had a different opinion.

“That is...”

“There’s no way official information from the palace would report the crown prince

as having deplorable character.”

“You shouldn’t speak so carelessly.”

The faculty leader immediately reproached that teacher. It was a remark that could easily be taken as saying that the crowned prince has a deplorable character.

“...Ah, that’s right.”

“Discipline, swordsmanship and magic prowess, no matter which you choose, there is no mistake that he really excels in them. In addition, wouldn’t one think that proper conduct was engraved into him as the the crown prince?”

The teacher who reported information about the crown prince first added redeeming qualities as well. It was probably to follow up on the faculty leader.

“That’s right isn’t it? Well then, let’s move to the next one.”

Taking such statements, the teacher in charge put an end to the talks about the prince and proceeded with the next subject.

“Yes. It’s viscount Lancelot Minister of the House Aqusmea.”

“Well then, on the Academy grounds it will be Lancelot-kun, just to be safe.”

The warning of the faculty leader arrived again. It was the duty of the faculty head to guide the teachers. Deciding a nickname for a student among other things, was made to protect them too.

“...Uhh, It’s my first time being a homeroom teacher so...”

Even if doing so was a bewildering novelty for the teachers.

“Get used to it. This is an order.”

“Understood. Lancelot-kun has good grades and displayed an excellent talent for magic as well. His personality is described as being mature.”

“...Then how about Charlotte-san?”

The one to speak was the teacher who raised concerns about the reports regarding to the crown prince.

“It’s the same.”

“The same? So both of them, are not only of high social status but also have an excellent talent compared to most of people?”

Again, that teacher had raised his doubts. If one wanted to describe it gently, his conduct was cautious, but to put it bluntly he was simply mistrustful.

“That’s just how it is with the royal and marquess families.”

The faculty leader declared flatly.

Those with outstanding talents had them due to their bloodline. It was the reason why aristocrats had been as respected as they were. Even if one thought otherwise, one must not deny such a thing at any cost.

“...Ah, that’s right. If that’s the case, then Vincent-kun should be excellent as well.”

“His talent in the sword is lacking and his physical strength is a problem. His talent in magic is about average. Well he’s just growing. He only studies if he is given motivation so proceed with caution. Although his character seems a little bit selfish from the outside, inside he seems really gentle.”

“So... only this piece information is really accurate, right?”

“That’s how it has been written. Well even if you don’t see the reports, his case is a well-known one after all.”

“Well-known?”

“Have you not heard about it? He ran amok after getting failing marks on the trial ceremony for magic and not being satisfied with the result. He also broke important magic tools in the process and Lancelot-kun who was supposed to take the trial with him was not able to do so. It’s seems he is a person much frowned on.”

“...That’s the worst, isn’t it?”

His conduct was exactly alike to that of the anecdotal selfish aristocrats. Just hearing about the story, the face of the teacher immediately turned dejected.

“Yes, Vincent-kun is a student that needs further attention, even among those first year students.”

Declaring this, it seems the Faculty head had also checked him beforehand.

“...I’m in charge of the B-class where Vincent was assigned though!”

It seems that was the reason why he suddenly turned dejected.

“Eh? Is that the case?”

On the other hand, the teacher assigned to A class was all smiles.

Normally, the implicit rule stated that the high aristocrats should be in the A class and followed by the lower aristocrats in B and C class accordingly. If it’s the children of the marquesses, then they should have really been in A class.

Under normal circumstances, he would be dejected knowing that there would be a problem child in the difficult to handle A-class, but it seems this time that was not the case.

“For some reason, his name appeared on my B-class roster. Isn’t that odd?”

The one who answered his question was the faculty leader.

“It was changed due to reasons.”

“Faculty leader, good heavens! What if the House Windhill complains about that?!”

“The House Aqusmea representative already came earlier saying, “Don’t tell me, you would put them in the same class?””

“...There’s discord already?”

“It seems that is the case. Officially, the classes have been arranged randomly. It has been an experiment in consideration of the Academy’s situation, or so runs the official excuse.”

“In other words?”

“Those who are in the same class have different social standings.”

“No way...”

Those who enrolled into the Royal Academy were not limited to aristocrats. Even the commoners, if they passed the entrance exam, would be able to attend. Of course the exam was a really big hurdle that wouldn't let you pass if you did not display excellence. But on the bright side, if one overcame it, the possibilities in one's future would become unlimited.

This year, it seemed there were many successful applicants. Those who passed the exam were informed, that the children of the Royal Family and the three marquesses were enrolled as well.

If they had caught the attention of those young lords and ladies and were used by them, it would be the same as seizing a thread of successful future career.

The teachers could only pray that they would behave well aiming for that.

This way the professors were given a completely new thing to worry about., Now it wouldn't be just usual squabbles between aristocrats, but also discord due to difference in social status.



The gate was crowded by numerous carriages.

It was a queue of vehicles long enough, that the tail disappeared from view. It was a spectacle that happened every year.

The students were entering the dorms, therefore there was not only a carriage with the person itself, but also a wagon carrying the person's luggage that was pulled along on the road.

It was luggage of young nobles. The amount was high. Even though there would really be plenty already with just the student's belongings, possessions of the servants who tagged along were added as well.

Just looking at this spectacle, one would already guess the social status of the first years. The ones walking on the edge of the street where the carriage lined up, were the commoners who had to carry their own luggage.

“Oi! You’re a hindrance! Move aside!”

The black-haired girl turned her head towards where the voice came from.

“What do you mean by hindrance!? I am following the rules! You on the other hand... Eh?”

The girl who threw a fit of complaints all of a sudden turned a bewildered facial expression to Rion. Behind him she noticed Vincent who having complained first, stood there with a displeased expression on his face.

“Erm... , Well, I apologize.”

“Why is Rion apologizing? Isn’t this girl the one who was in the way with the luggage she was carrying?”

Because the girl also was a first year student, she must have been a commoner. The large amount of her luggage was placed on the ground. She was probably scolded by Vincent at a time when she was taking a rest due to fatigue.

“That is so, however I also think that the way in which Vincent-sama’s has talked was too severe. Shouldn’t you speak more tactfully towards a lady, sir?”

“Whether they be a woman or whatever, I don’t care. They should not be allowed to hinder me.”

“That may be so, however... Miss would you please move your luggage aside? The carriages frequently ride through this place so leaving it there would be a hindrance to the pedestrians.”

“Eh? Ah, but...”

“Is your luggage heavy? If that is the case, I can move it for you instead.”

“Ah, no, that’s not the case but...”

“Do you want me to carry it for you? If you really wish so, I shall do as you say...”

Rion didn't know the reason behind the bewilderment of the female student. His innermost thoughts were that he got entangled with a somewhat weird woman making him perplexed.

“You're wrong! Erm... , Are you from the House Windhill?”

“...How would you know that?”

Rion's gaze turned severe immediately. He was currently wearing black clothes and an eye patch to hide his heterochromia. Although doing that wouldn't necessarily hide his handsome face, when his eyes cast a severe glare, the coldness one could feel from them transformed him into a beauty.

Sure enough, the face of the girl on the receiving end, had turned into frightened one.

“Rion. You are scaring the girl as well.”

“Erm... I just want to know the reason.”

With Vincent pointing it out, Rion became conscious of the fact and turned his frown into a smile while asking.

“You called him Vincent-sama...”

“Just from the name?”

“If it's someone from the three marquess houses, I would remember it easily as expected.”

“...You are a first year, are you not?”

“Yes.”

“Understood. Assuming we were indeed from the House Windhill household, what of it?”

It's not like he was content with the girl's explanation, but for the time being, he decided to move on.

“Why are you on foot?”

“Why? We are taking a stroll.”

Rion answered with a face implying “Why are you even asking?”. Travelling by foot with no purpose in mind was obviously taking a stroll.

“Yes?”

However, it seems the female student didn’t understand.

“Because we’re bored, we took a stroll... Keeping in consideration Vincent-sama’s... exercise regimen.”

He was about to say “diet” but changed his words immediately. Because he knew that Vincent would definitely be angry if he said so.

“...But you were supposed to come here in a carriage, and should have forcibly drove in the opposite lane.”

“Yes?”

This time it was Rion’s turn to use a questioning tone. He immediately thought that what the girl was saying didn’t make any sense.

“No, it’s nothing.”

“...What should we do with your luggage?”

“...I will carry it myself.”

“Understood.”

Rion, who at first thought that they were entangled with an odd woman, tried to immediately move away from that place. However, a voice coming from one of the carriages prevented that.

“I will have House Windhill’s deplorable acts stop now!”

“What? I haven’t done anything!”

“Are you not bullying the female student? To think you would brandish your family’s influence towards a helpless lady! If such a thing is not disgraceful, then what is!?”

“Like I told you, I have not done such a thing!”

“I’m telling you to stop!”

“Getting full of yourself... Firstly, just who the hell are you?”

“What did you say!?”

Vincent’s opponent raised a startled voice. Well that was to be expected.

“Vincent-sama, is that not Lancelot-sama of House Aqusmea?”

Rion whispered to Vincent.

“...Come to think of it, we have met before haven’t we? However, it was when we were children and, I can’t remember it clearly.”

“Even if that’s the case, looking at the crest on the carriage...”

There was a spherical emblem of three water drops placed in a swirling manner on the carriage that Lancelot rode. Every aristocrat in the kingdom knew that crest belonged to the House Aqusmea.

“...Oh that’s right. What should we do?”

“A conflict between two from the marquess households would not benefit the country.”

“Right, then what should we do?”

“Let us withdraw from this situation and depart. I shall take care of the small details.”

“Alright, I’ll leave it to you.”

Rion separated from Vincent and stood in front of the female student.

“To be frank, I do not know the reason, but if we have offended you in any way, I apologize. Please forgive us.”

Having said that, Rion bowed deeply.

“Eh? Ah no... I”

“Will you forgive us?”

“Erm... Yes.”

“Well then, please excuse us.”

“Ah...”

“...Is there anything more?”

“You are?”

“I am merely Vincent-sama’s valet. Though there is a possibility of us meeting in the academy, as I am just a lowly servant, please ignore my existence.”

“Ignore? There’s no way I can...”

“That’s as far as my existence goes.”

The real intention behind stressing it was because he didn’t want to be involved with a seemingly troublesome woman.

Sending a signal to Rion, Vincent walked ahead looking displeased. He must have gotten irritated with the other noble who was still spouting complaints.

Passing the carriage that Lancelot rode and lightly bowing his head, Rion followed Vincent.

The female student who saw that muttered softly.

“It seems that apart from the regular capture characters, there is someone like you as well, huh? Was he a hidden target?”

If Rion heard her voice just now, his hypothesis would be justified.

But since he did not, he just advanced forward.

Soon, Rion halted and turned his head towards the already distant girl, the scene somehow piquing his curiosity.

Handing her luggage over to Lancelot, the female student rode in his carriage.

Even though she refused him, who was only a valet, it was okay for her to have Lancelot carry her luggage. Rion thought he was correct considering her odd.

“Rion! What are you waiting for!?”

“Yes, coming.”

Stopping any further thoughts, Rion followed Vincent’s back.

“Rion has been right, entering ahead of time has been the right thing to do.”

“To think getting ahead by day would be that much different after all. Although moving the entrance of the other aristocratic families to a further date would have prevented such a crowd from happening in the first place.”

“That’s right, isn’t it? That aside, the woman before has been quite weird, hasn’t she?”

“So Vincent-sama thinks so as well? It would be better to not get entangled with such a person. I have a feeling that this type will bring you nothing but troubles.”

“Right, I’ll be careful.”

Unfortunately, this warning of Rion would be meaningless. Even if Vincent had no desire to do so, getting entangled with the woman was something destined to happen.

The Rion of that day, have yet to understand it. That this world was not just an “alternate world”, but was a “special world” at the same time.

That this world has a “protagonist” in it and the woman they met just now was that “protagonist”.



Waking up when it was still early and starting his training, even though his life in the Royal Academy had just begun, Rion had not the tiniest bit of intention to change this

habit. Actually, now that he left the mansion, he planned to do more training and studying.

He, who was merely a valet, didn't have the right to attend classes. Although he had to go to Vincent's classroom during break time, his working hours were limited to that only.

The time he could use freely for himself has multiplied. As to how he should use that time, Rion was thinking about it while swinging a sword.

What should he prioritize? Swordsmanship? Magic? His studies? If it would be studies, then what kind? Although he was free to that degree, that was not what was occupying his mind.

It was full of curiosity towards the female student.

It seems that the incident that had happened between them had by now spread widely inside the academy. In a rather warped way.

Vincent, who was from the marquess house, was wielding his authority to bully a female commoner. However, rather than yielding, the girl pointed out his errors instead and Lancelot, happening to see her dignified conduct, had decided to help her.

Thus Vincent, unable to continue the harassment, was forced to apologize to the girl.

The female student not yielding to the heir of a marquess and magnificently repelling him with sound reason, immediately became the center of attention. Being able to get closer to Lancelot of the Aqusmea due to that was also a reason why the rumour has gained the attention of many.

In return, Vincent's reputation plummeted. The rumour making rounds said that it looked like the rumored black sheep of the Windhills was really a failure.

Rion could not understand why was such a falsehood spreading through people as if it was a fact. The queue of the carriages was very long, there should have been numerous witnesses.

He felt an ill-intent behind the rumours.

Even though they were trying to raise Vincent's reputation for the succession conflict,

it plummeted instead. Rion would not permit such a thing. He could not forgive himself for letting it happen.

Leaving things as they were wouldn't be good. Merely strengthening Vincent's swordsmanship and magic would not be enough.

The succession conflict was political. In order to become the victor, necessary knowledge and strength had to be obtained at all costs. Rion's sword-holding hand was inadvertently filled with strength.

As if reacting to that resolve, the spirits began to gather within his surroundings. Different from before, their appearance now easily reflected in Rion's eyes.

Being completely unlike the spirits of Ryou's world, the appearance of those was perfectly spherical. Rion could now call them easily as he liked.

Or rather, truth be told...

"Sarah, Diane, have you been trying to cheer me up?"

He had even named them.

Although even when he spoke to them, there was, of course, no reply. But even so, during times there had been no people in his surroundings, Rion began to put his thoughts and feelings into words in this way, and had been talking to them.

It didn't really have a specific purpose. If he must really say it, he had no proper conversation partners other than Vincent and Ariel, and those two were his lords. They were not people whom you could vent your complaints to.

To Rion, the spirits were the only beings that he could speak about such things.

"Or perhaps, are you just hungry?"

The spirits gathered on both hands of Rion and had begun to absorb mana.

"...are you a koi that swarm on a bait or something?"

Those were Ryou's thoughts that were put into words. Ryou's consciousness had still remained in this mind and not just that, the consciousness of Flay who resided in this

world could also resurface.

The two individuals' sense of values hugely differed from each other, so they had met, but were not able to merge completely.

That resulted in the personalities residing in his body turning into three existences – Rion who was the master personality and the fragments of the two that had not fused.

Rather than becoming one personality, the combination had transformed it into three.

Even Rion himself could not help but feel amazed about that peculiarity. And although it made him feel some apprehension, he had also accepted it. Every single one of them had been Rion after all.

It was also unexpectedly useful at times.

“Build an information network, huh? That’s an idea.”

While being accompanied by the spirits, he had also began thinking of a way to raise Vincent’s fame. If one was burdened by malicious rumors, then the only way forward was to establish favourable ones. If the rumors were really spread with ill-intent, then he had to obtain the strength to determine the source.

“So in the end I really must lay my hands on someone again, huh? If that ever reaches Ariel-sama, I’m going to be whipped badly again, huh? A really serious whipping...”

While wearing a bitter smile, Rion put on the eyepatch that he took off earlier. That was to not let Vincent’s reputation suffer due to having a valet with heterochromia.

Everything was for the sake of his master, Vincent. It was for the sake of Vincent’s victory in the conflict of heirs and Ariel’s successful future.

With the rising sun on his back, Rion returned to the dorm.

Chapter 9

Being followed by a weird woman

It wasn't only the young aristocrats receiving different treatment based on their status and title rank, their servants were treated differently too.

Although the attendants were made to be on standby in the common rooms while their respective masters were taking classes, even those rooms varied depending on the House they were serving.

This year the best rooms were prepared for the servants of the royal family and the three main Houses. There was a desk that they required to perform their duties prepared for each one of them with an unlimited supply of ink and paper. There was also a napping room attached to the side, truly a luxurious environment.

Even the snacks and confectionaries were of the highest quality. Although those were not for the servants but were prepared for them to take to their lords.

As for what the valets were doing in that waiting room back then, in reality, there was hardly anything job-related for them to do.

Even the ones serving the crown prince and the three lordlings had no other things to do but study. Their valet-related tasks weren't really taxing.

They did not even have the usual job of arranging tea parties since the academic life also had the purpose of intensifying social interactions, there was never really a need to hold one. The valets now had more free days to spend than when they had been living in their lord's mansion.

But of course, specific circumstances depended on the will of the valets themselves, some were just like Rion who thought of it as an opportunity to study diligently.

All servants of House Aqusmea were also of that type, which is why they were enthusiastically writing with their pens in the book on top of their desks. All of them had a reason to do so.

The valet of the heir being the future butler or majordomo was also a usual career progression path in the House Aqusmea. But the amount of staff serving Lancelot was not limited to one, numbering three servants instead.

Of course, it was not because looking after Lancelot was difficult to that degree. Them being candidates for the future majordomo, they were all picked to offer competition to each other.

Next were the servants of the House Fatillas' Charlotte. They, all being maids, had almost no future promotion possibilities. The sole exception was the head maid position, but being given that meant no hope for marriage.

Therefore what those girls wished for was not promotion, but being able to find a marriage partner and quit their work.

As for what those maids were doing right then...

"Hey, why are you wearing an eye patch?"

They were trying to get close to Rion, who was the most striking person among those in the waiting room.

For them, as they did not know his circumstances, Rion was a really suitable partner. If he became the majordomo of a Marquess estate, he would be able to afford an extremely affluent lifestyle, even more impressive, than that of lesser nobles, and on top of it, he would also wield a great deal of authority.

"Due to injury, it can't see that well. The doctor said that it's better to rest it as much as possible."

"Injury? Did it suffer harm?"

"Although I can't really tell by its appearance, that may indeed have been the case."

"So one can't tell at a glance, huh?"

Hearing Rion's reply, smiles floated on the maids' faces. For them, it was important that it didn't impact the appearance or eyesight.

"Your name would be?"

“It’s Rion.”

“I see, I’m Mila.”

“Ah, you see, I’m Margaret.”

“I’m Sylvia.”

“Miss Mila, Miss Margaret and Miss Sylvia then, please treat me well.”

“““ ”““

The three maids were immediately entranced by Rion who said that with a smile. Although they were older compared to Rion, he had captivated women of an even older age than them before.

Though their first intention was only to lightly introduce themselves, he completely captured their hearts

“H-Hey! You know...”

“What is it?”

“Does Rion know a shop that serves delicious desserts?”

“I’m not very well-versed in those matters.”

“I see...”

The maids thought their attempt to use asking for good shops as a pretext to arrange a date had failed but...

“But I want to search for such shops because Vincent-sama has a sweet tooth. The problem is that eating dessert all alone was embarrassing...”

“Then, I will guide you to such shops!”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. I know a particularly good one. Because it’s the best, I’m sure it would suit your

master's taste. This time, I'll be there to guide you, so let's check it out."

"...Won't it cause trouble to you?"

"Don't worry! We should help each other in times of trouble!"

"Well then, I accept your offer."

"I know of shops as well!!"

Witnessing the success of Mila, Margaret has raised her voice without delay.

"Eh?"

"I'm knowledgeable of such places too, so I'll guide you as well."

"Okay, Thank you very much."

"Then, when are we going?"

"Wait a minute! I'm the one who was promised first!"

"You have yet to set the date correct? I will ask for one ahead of you then!"

"What did you say!?"

"Be quiet!"

The one who shouted loudly at the maids was one of the Aquasmea valets. However, the three maids were unfazed by this.

"If you want a quiet place, then why not go to the library and study there instead?"

"What did you say!?"

"We are sharing this waiting room. We are not obliged to hold back our voices just for you."

"I am trying to seriously study here! Obviously, you are in the wrong by engaging in such frivolous conversation!"

“It’s nothing frivolous. Deepening relationship by interaction with fellow servants is an important thing.”

“Interaction? So taking delight while being surrounded by women is called “interaction”?”

“Ha?”

Suddenly being pointed at by the sharp end of the argument, Rion was startled. Although it couldn’t be helped because he was one of the causes of the guy’s anger, it was still too sudden.

“It seems the valet of House Windhill is easygoing and content with just talking to the maids.”

“...It is by the command of Vincent-sama after all.”

“Talking with maids? As expected of the Windhill’s...”

“That I must be gentle to women at all cost. Vincent-sama constantly reminds me of that.”

Rion immediately continued speaking not even waiting for the other guy to finish his words.

“...That Vincent? Telling you to be gentle to women?”

“Isn’t that way of addressing Vincent-sama impertinent of you? If that is really the etiquette of the House Aqusmea, then I will respond accordingly.”

“...It is not. However, for viscount Vincent-dono to say such a thing... If that’s the case, then wouldn’t he have had apologized to that commoner instead?”

What the valet of Lancelot was talking about was the incident with the female student. Which was exactly what Rion wanted to talk about.

“I wonder what are you talking about? It is because he wanted to be gentle towards women that he apologized, even though he was not in the wrong.” ”

“However...”

“Would you mind me asking a question?”

“What is it?”

“Because you are House Aqusmea’s valet, you should’ve been present there and heard what happened, right?”

“...Yeah, I heard everything.”

After seemingly falling into deep thought for a while, the valet acknowledged it.

“Do you remember the words of caution of Vincent-sama directed towards the female student?”

“Words of caution? I only remember him yelling...”

This valet didn’t remember details of an incident that left such an impression. Rion was doubtful of that, but rather than pressing him, he decided to make him speak of the truth himself instead.

“Because the student placed her large baggage on the road, thinking it was dangerous he warned her to put it aside.”

“...Oh, her baggage, huh? Indeed, it was really big.”

“You remember it, don’t you?”

“Yeah, because it was carried in our carriage.”

“There is something I want to ask about that incident as well.”

“What is it?”

“That woman was a commoner. And despite that she made Viscount Lancelot-dono carry her luggage. Why was such a thing not rebuked?”

“...Indeed. Why?”

The other valet had “that’s strange...” written on his face in capital letters and looked over at his fellows. Their response was the same sort of confusion. Inclining their

heads, they were left to wonder about it.

“That female student had caused trouble to others. I don’t know why Vincent-sama, who only cautioned her about that, is the one receiving prejudice. To get through to her, Vincent-sama had shouted towards that female student. And she has done such a thing to viscount Lancelot-dono, which was an even more impertinent conduct in my opinion.”

“Agreed...”

Because class relations in this world were strict, a commoner shouting at an aristocrat was unthinkable. Even if the aristocrats was at fault, because his social status was higher, it would be immediately concluded that it was the commoner’s transgression. That was a common practice in this world.

So why did the rumors spreading around go against that reality? After seeing the response of Lancelot’s valets, Rion became more confused by the situation.

“It’s that woman...”

“Yes?”

The one who cut in the conversation was Mila. She was not even trying to conceal her hateful facial expression.

“That woman’s impudence breaks all common sense. Even though she’s a mere commoner, she was getting overly friendly towards Charlotte-sama, you know?”

“...Is that the case? But why did you let her do that?”

“I reproached her, you know? However, Charlotte-sama overruled me, and decided to lie telling her there’s no need to be concerned about it.”

“...Charlotte-sama herself said that?”

“Because she is a very kind person, she has said so for appearances, but deep inside surely...”

“Is that so?”

Mila's personal opinion was clearly mixed in there, but there was no merit in pointing that out. Rion went back to the valet he questioned earlier.

"...Erm, What does Viscount Lancelot-dono think?"

"Yeah... Probably because he is a tolerant person..... , No, that doesn't seem to be the case. It looks to me that for some reason he was interested in that commoner girl. "

"...Is that so."

More confusion entered Rion's mind. Even though Vincent and Ariel were fairly tolerant towards Rion who was also a commoner, he knew that their relationship was causing the other servants of the House to knit their eyebrows.

And that relationship was strictly within the limits of servant-and-master attitude. If Rion acted in an overly familiar manner, both Ariel and Vincent would scold him for that harshly.

Although Rion thought for a moment that it might not have been the same in the other Houses, seeing the attitude of the maid and the valet, he understood that it wasn't the case.

Then why was such a special treatment allowed towards that female student? No matter how he thought about it, he couldn't understand.

Not being able to comprehend meant that he didn't have enough information. Rion began to take action in order to spread his information network wider.



Rion's activities brought a different result than desired. Although he was troubled by it, in a way, it was already beyond his control.

After deepening his relationships with the maids of House Aqusmea, he was able to obtain a certain amount of information from the gossip they shared. He knew from experience, that by placing his sources well, the knowledge he desired would fall into his hands.

The higher the position of the maid, the harder it was for information to reach her.

That was why the ones he approached were the best targets in the Academy. One could say that there was no gossip that could elude them and not reach his ears now.

Next, he decided to make a different kind of information network. What Rion was aiming for this time were the commoners. Although the fact that making connections with aristocrats would be hard in Rion's situation was also a factor, when it came to information spreading, he thought it would be easier to do it through commoners than the secretive aristocrats.

Not just information gathering, but spreading information that was convenient for him was also his objective.

"Yes. Is it fine to leave it here?"

"Y-Yes."

Rion handed over the bundle of paper sheets to the girl in front of the classroom entrance.

"Please don't let them scatter around again, okay?"

"Ah, Okay. I will be careful."

The face of the female was bright red as Rion talked gently.

"Well then, I'll be off."

"Erm!"

"Yes?"

"Thank you very much, Rion-sama."

"No, please do not mind it. But about my name..."

"You are well-known for being a very kind person..."

"Well that is embarrassing. Besides, being gentle is due to my master's constant reminders."

“Your master?”

“It is Vincent-sama of Marquess House Windhill.”

“Eh?”

Hearing the name of Vincent, the female student raised a surprised voice. Although he felt quite down upon seeing that reaction, Rion did not let it show on his face but continued to speak while staring into the eyes of the female student.

“Because he is an awkward person, he gets misunderstood easily. Please, try looking at his true self.”

“...Okay... It’s your request after all.”

“What is your name? I’m afraid not knowing it puts me at a disadvantage.”

“...It’s Anne.”

“Anne-san. Well then, farewell, until opportunity arises to meet again.”

“Yes. Erm.”

“What is it?”

“If I stumbled upon Rion-san, would it be okay to greet you?”

“Yeah. We got to know each other after all.”

Just like that, if there was a female student in trouble, he would lend them his hand in any way required and telling them afterward that it was due to Vincent’s guidance.

Although he did it to spread the impression that there would be no way that Vincent would be rude towards a lady, the spreading rumor was completely different.

The rumor making rounds with the female students said that there was a considerably beautiful valet who might have looked a bit cold on the outside but was actually very gentle.

Most female students Rion met would tell others they couldn’t fathom why such a

lovely person was serving Vincent as a valet.

The only reputation going up was Rion's while Vincent's never changed.

However, there was one more person losing popularity because of that.

That female student was-

"Rion-san!"

"...Maria-sama."

"Please drop the honorifics, I'm a commoner, you know?"

If you were aware of such things, then you should be more careful about your way of speaking. After all, I might have been a commoner too, but I was still a retainer of a Marquess House. Those were the thoughts Rion had at that moment, but wouldn't say. Anyhow, he didn't want to get involved with this female student, he decided that even before their first meeting.

"Do you require something perhaps?"

"Nothing in particular, but since I caught sight of you... Can't I?"

She looked at Rion with the upturned eyes like those of a spoiled child, but he wasn't a person to be moved by that.

"I am in the middle of conversation with Anne-san."

In other words, no, it was not a good time.

"...Erm, are you still talking?"

"We're almost done, but I feel that ending the conversation in such a way would be discourteous. Anne-san, I apologize."

"No, I do not mind. Besides, the one at fault was..."

The gaze of Anne went towards Maria. Much different to the look she gave Rion, it was very cold. With this, again, Maria gained the enmity of another female student.

Even though it's not like there were no other chances to become closer to him, Maria still kept approaching Rion one way or another.

Their first conversation was her apologizing for having Rion apologize. Although it would've been better if she ended it with just that, Maria began to bad-mouth Vincent afterward. Having everything forced on you was hard, right? Although she said that with sympathy, Rion could only take it as a besmirching his master.

Although it made him instantly displeased, thinking about the possibility of another strange rumor spreading, he held back his feelings earnestly. However, the House Fatillas maids who saw it exploded in fury.

That scene they saw was Maria forcing herself on the reluctant Rion, and while it was really like that, he looked more pitiful in their eyes than what was actually the case.

The three maids immediately yelled at Maria. However, that was immediately rebuked and halted by their mistress, Charlotte. Due to that, their animosity swelled up even more.

The maids' sentiment was favorable to Rion and it had spread to the other female servants in the Academy. Maria became a horrible woman for all those that heard about it.

And yet, not learning her lesson, Maria still never stopped trying to speak to Rion. With that, the animosity towards Maria had even spread to the female students. Not only because they were attracted to Rion.

It was also due to the spreading jealousy about Maria's closeness to the great aristocratic Houses, even though she was a commoner like them.

"Well then, I shall excuse myself."

"Yes."

"Wait!"

Rion, who parted with Anne and was about to leave, was stopped by Maria.

"Do you still need something?"

“Rather than “still”, our conversation has even yet to start.”

“...However.”

“What?”

“Is it fine to talk to me while disregarding the presence of Viscount Lancelot-sama? “

Maria was not alone. Lancelot and Charlotte were together with her.

Because this happened all the time, it made Rion think of Maria as troublesome all the more, but today he planned to make use of the fact.

“That’s no problem.”

“I don’t think this is Maria’s to decide.”

“But...”

“It’s going to be a bother, isn’t it?”

“...No, it’s nothing. Maria wanted to talk to you, so it’s not for me to interfere.”

“However, I am but a mere valet.”

“I know. How many times do you think we met?”

“...”

Was it fine to settle it with such a lenient comment, Rion asked himself. The position of the aristocrat and commoner was different, and with the noble being more important and from the Marquess House, he should be prioritized more.

Of course, there was no way Rion could say that. If he was Lancelot’s retainer, he would be admonished, but Rion was an employee from a different House.

The silence was the best protest he was permitted.

“If you do mind it, then I will order you myself. Listen to Maria. You may be a valet of another household, but there is no way you would disobey my words, is there?”

“With respects sir, I will if it goes against Vincent-sama’s commands.”

“...Is that so. Then what about this situation?”

“...Unfortunately, I was told to be gentle towards ladies.”

“Then speak with her.”

“...Understood. Well then, what is your business?”

“This time, we are going to eat tasty sweets together. Won’t Rion come as well?”

Calling Rion without honorifics suddenly made his eyebrow twitch. No one noticed because it was the one under his eye patch.

“...Is that invitation for Vincent-sama?”

“No. It is Rion that I am inviting.”

No honorifics again. The mature Ryou went to work on soothing Rion who was about to shiver. Of course, no one in his surroundings could know that.

“Though you troubled yourself with inviting me, I will have to decline.”

“Why?”

“It is not proper for a valet to dine with important personages without the presence of his lord. And even if that wasn’t the case I sadly have no time for such pleasantries.”

“They won’t really mind your presence there. Besides, you lie about not having time for it.”

This persistence has irritated Rion even more. The only person he would ever permit that attitude from was Ariel’s. This reaction was entirely dependent on Rion’s feelings and has nothing to do with stubbornness itself.

“Why do you say so?”

“Because you went on a date with Charlotte’s maid.”

“...I was planning on informing Charlotte-sama of that matter.

“Charlotte said that she didn’t mind.”

“...It was not a date. I just asked them to guide me to shops with delicious confectioneries. Those kinds of things are also among the jobs of the Valet.”

“Was it delicious?”

“...Yes. I was introduced to a really good shop.”

Rion already knew the words that would come next even without hearing them.

“Then, let’s go there.”

“By all means, do as you please. As I have told you before, I do not have the time.”

“But...”

“I must go to Vincent-sama’s side immediately. This takes precedence over anything else, so please do not hinder me anymore. I have to excuse myself.”

Breaking off before Maria figured out a retort, Rion left the place quickly.

“...As expected of hidden characters, capturing seems difficult.”

Due to that, Rion was not able to hear that mutter.

Chapter 10

Something like a “summer vacation” doesn’t concern valets

With the first semester ending as if in a blink of an eye, the summer break has arrived.

Rion came back to the mansion a little later than Vincent. Tidying things up in the dorm and borrowing books he wanted to read, while on holiday, being one of the many reasons for the delay.

However, that was just for appearance’s sake, in reality, he just wanted a little more free time to deal with certain matters.

Matters not related to the Academy, but to the slums.

“What’s the situation?”

“We managed to absorb several smaller players. However, the problem is that the opponent was aware of our plan and did the same thing, so the balance of power is yet to change.”

“This “opponent” being?”

“It’s Gordon’s bastards.”

“Oh, there was him too, huh? That guy.”

Even Rion knew him by the name. Gordon was the leader of a major group, who was controlling a separate territory when he was still residing in the slums. His gang was among the one of the few who were proficient in direct conflicts. Now, his opponent was going to be Rion’s organization.

“Because their strength is roughly the same as ours, no side dares to make a move.”

“But, if we dealt with him, we would gain total control in one fell swoop, huh?”

“Well...”

“How about a direct assault?”

“We might be able to win, but we would likely suffer too much damage. That would create an opportunity for the other bastards.”

“Other bastards?”

It looked like there was another influential gang that Rion didn’t know about.

“Bastards from the Courtesan Quarter next to the slum area. It’s them.”

“So just looking at the situation inside the slums alone is not good enough. What if that Gordon was taken care of?”

“...I wonder... He has a second and third-in-command after all.”

The subordinate answered after being lost in thought for a bit. It was not very encouraging.

“So they might fall into chaos for some time, but a new leader emerging fast is guaranteed, huh?”

“Most likely.”

“Then doing things by force is no good. Looks like we must crush them with economic strength, huh?”

“What is that?”

The scoundrels of the slums didn’t know concepts like “economic strength”.

“Erm... Outdoing them.”

Rion answered after finding a word that fit well as an equivalent. This happened often in conversations with them.

“Yeah. But how do we do it?”

“I will think of something. What are your sources of income?”

“Gambling, prostitution, loans, black market, tasks you don’t talk about to others. Well... It’s killing.”

“...”

Upon hearing the words Rion’s mind was greatly perplexed. Although he was already aware of that, being told straight in his face still shocked him.

“Is something wrong?”

“The person inside me was just a little bit surprised.”

“What are you saying now? Isn’t boss also from this area?”

“Like I said, the person inside me... Let’s leave it at that. What is the most lucrative business, loans?”

“Erm... Well, trying to borrow money in this place is the last resort for people. So it’s not very good. Also, although the interest rate is higher than elsewhere, repayment collection is...”

“In that case, what’s better?”

“Gambling is stable.”

“Stable, huh?”

Gambling was rigged to make the house win and the man was saying that it was stable. However, it was done by other organizations as well. So something was needed in order to surpass them.

“Well then, should we improve the overall quality of service?”

“Se... Seh... What is it??”

*(*EN: He tries to pronounce the unfamiliar word “services”)*

“Because improving the profits instantly seems unlikely, we just have to make

gamblers think that our gambling hall is better than others.”

“Oh, but how do we do that?”

“With trivial things, like offering those who come to gamble a cup of tea or some snacks. We should have beautiful girls... Ah, prostitutes even, to offer entertainment too. I want to make those who win spend more money.”

“I see.”

The businesses of this world were yet to invent extra services. Just those trivial ideas already brought admiration of his subordinates.

“That being the case, we should do something about the prostitutes. Make their appearance neat, and give them proper attire.”

You couldn't say that the quality of the women selling their bodies in the slums was good by any standards. That being the case they would not do as service.

“That's right, isn't it? If that's the case, then those who cross-dress like boss are better... I apologize.”

Under Rion's glare, the panicking man visibly shrunk.

“...Well, that's how it is. Let's raise the quality a bit and have them bring the customers in. We also have to clean the place... And manners must also be taught, huh?”

“Even that?”

“We need a key characteristic to differentiate us from others... We need a capable person, huh? From fallen nobles... Or is there any kind of place with excellent young ladies that have come to ruin? We'll have those kinds of people teach etiquette.”

“I will try searching.”

“Conducting repairs on the buildings and cleaning up the roads is a must. Calculate the necessary expenses for that.”

“...Understood.”

Because the subject of the conversation was getting wider, the man was perplexed. This was the same as usual too.

His subordinates were always surprised by his ideas that came from Ryou's memories of the other world. Moreover, whenever he thought up of something, it would be followed by a bunch of other things.

For his subordinates implementation of all that was quite difficult.

"However, wasting money is not good. The things that you are able to do, you should do them yourselves."

"Yes."

"I should make you guys learn etiquette as well. A set of manners that you can use when dealing with customers."

"...Seriously?"

"I'm serious. Let's stop with the "because it's cheap, the quality is poor" mindset. Work harder so that you can achieve fine quality even if it's cheap."

"Understood."

"Do it seriously. At the very least, it's better than risking each other's life right?"

"Indeed."

"Think of other things until my next arrival. I will also think of something, I will see if I can provide the other things."

"Understood. I will convey that to the others."

"Well then, I'm leaving it to you."

With this, after quite some time, the domain under Rion would be tinged with liveliness and not resemble a shanty town any longer. Little by little the neighbourhood would improve and the ones living in it would change.

The dwellers of the slum, for the first time in their lives, began feeling hope for the

future. That was certain to change the area altogether.



After concluding his businesses in the slums, Rion had finally returned to the Windhill manor. Since it was merely the return of a valet, Rion, there was nothing really special about it. He entered the grounds through the staff's door and went straight towards his room.

He planned to inform Vincent of his return tomorrow morning. For today, he just wanted to take a breather...

Having entered his room, his body immediately went rigid. That was because Ariel was sitting on his bed.

"...You are late, are you not?"

"Ah, yes milady. Things took more time than expected."

"I see. Hurry up and take it off."

"Milady?"

"Your eye-patch."

"Ah, that's right, isn't it? It's not necessary here."

While inside the mansion, there was no need to hide his heterochromia. Rion took off his eye-patch as ordered.

"Come here."

"...Erm?"

"That's fine already, take a sit in front of me."

As usual, an expression that won't let you argue or refuse. Rion went down in front of Ariel on his knees. While he looked up towards the girl she put her hands on his cheeks.

“Ariel-sama?”

“Stay still... As I thought, beautiful. Rion’s eyes are really beautiful.”

Saying so, Ariel was staring intently into Rion’s eyes. For him, the eyes looking at him were even more beautiful.

“How many?”

“Milady?”

“How many women have been seduced by those eyes?”

“...Seduced?”

“Don’t play a fool. I listened carefully when onii-sama talked about it. You seduced indiscriminately, whether it be the retainer maids or the female students, right?”

“No milady, I did no such thing.”

“You are lying, aren’t you?”

Ariel’s hands, that were gently holding his cheeks until now, began tapping them lightly.

“...It is not a l-”

“Still trying to lie?”

Those hands were starting to gain strength. The tapping sounds made way for loud slaps.

“It’s not... A l-lie... I-It hurts. Please, milady, stop it.”

“I refuse, I won’t let you lie to me.”

“R-rather, than, seducing it was...”

“You plan to continue on lying?”

"I-It was gathering, i-information."

"Hmm?"

"It's similar to what I did in the mansion before. I was thinking of gathering information."

"That...! How many women did you do it with!?"

"I didn't! I never made that kind of a relationship in there! I'm telling the truth!"

"...Really?"

"It is the truth."

"I see. In that case, I'll forgive you."

"Thank you very much milady."

Although he was being hit due to false accusations, and even though this was not a moment to be grateful, Rion didn't mind it.

"...But, why did you do such things?"

"That is..."

Rion told Ariel about the things that had happened in the Academy.

That he had done so to raise Vincent's reputation, only to see it get worse for some reason. That to stop this trend and make his master's reputation go back to the better path he needed to gather intelligence. That to achieve it he decided to widen his connections within the maids and the female students, and so on.

Ariel was making a difficult face while intently listening to the story.

"I am very sorry for not being able to carry out my duties properly."

"...No. We're just starting. There should be plenty of opportunities for redemption."

"Yes milady."

“...Have you met him?”

“Met who?”

Rion felt that Ariel was acting differently from usual. The flow of the conversation has changed, and it was hard for him to catch up.

“Have you met the Crown Prince?”

“Ah. Not really, it’s was more like catching a glimpse of him.”

“I see. What do you think?”

“...His aura is so calm that it’s unthinkable that he is of the same generation. That’s about it. I only saw him from afar after all.”

“Oh right.”

“Milady, have you not meet him?”

Now, Ariel and the Crown Prince were betrothed. Though there should have been many opportunities for them to meet, basing on how Ariel talked, it didn’t feel that way.

“...Only during the engagement ceremony.”

“Only then?”

“It’s a political marriage after all. The Crown Prince doesn’t think much of me, you know?”

“Even though it’s just a political marriage, if enough chance meetings were arranged, surely he would come to grow fond of you. If it’s Ariel-sama then that’s certain.”

“If the meetings have accumulated, huh?”

Even with Rion’s words of encouragement, Ariel’s facial expression didn’t change. Thinking that it was due to the shock that her relationship with the Crown Prince was not going well, Rion’s feelings had turned gloomy as well.

“It’s the first time I’ve been separated from Rion for so long ever since we met.”

“That’s right, isn’t it?”

“It has only been roughly two years since you arrived here. Is this long or short? I wonder.”

“I think that what determines whether that is long or short is not the amount of time spent together, but how it was spent.”

“Oh, indeed. What does Rion think?”

“...I consider that span of time irreplaceable. I expect the same of the time from now on.”

“I see...”

“Milady... Did the separation perhaps make you lonely?”

“Wha!?!”

Completely taken by surprise of Rion’s question, Ariel couldn’t say anything. Her body turned stiff and her face flushed bright red.

“It’s the first time since birth that you have been separated from your beloved brother so, I think that’s inevitable.”

“...That’s right.”

“Why not take advantage of the holiday? “

“Right, I will do that.”

While grinning and smiling, Ariel has again put her hands on Rion’s cheeks.

This time, she didn’t hold back from the start. Accompanied by loud sounds, they began to swell.

“Erm... I... t... h... ur... t... s”

“In this one month, I will tease you as with all my might.”

“Eh? Ah– i-it hurts!”

After that, Ariel continued smacking Rion until his face turned red.



Despite returning to the mansion after a long absence, Rion’s life did not change. He continued his studies and training every day.

He was forging his body in pre-dawn darkness and taking tutorial classes under the pretext of “aiding Ariel and Vincent”. Occasionally, he was practicing dance and etiquette as well as swordsmanship.

When it was time for magic training Rion didn’t participate. Although that made Ariel displeased, unusually, Rion stood firm in his refusal.

Apart from that, he would be practicing letters and self-studying using the books he borrowed from the library of the Academy. Finally, there was one of his few secrets that only Vincent and Ariel knew of. The projects involving the slum area.

Valet-like works were yet to come but, that was the same as usual.

Rion always thought he was really blessed. Although the treatment from people other than Ariel and Vincent was unchanging, for Rion those kinds of things didn’t matter.

He had already gotten used to it. It has always been the same, ever since he became old enough to be aware of his surroundings.

The only part of life in the mansion that Rion was unhappy with was the night time.

On the bed, inside the dim lit room, one could barely see white skin. There, a pair of legs stretched out to embrace Rion.

While in that position Rion’s body was moving slowly. Matching those movements heavy breathing of a woman could be heard in the room.

Finally, with a final loud gasp, she hugged Rion’s body with all her might. Right after that, her strength left her completely. Exhaling deeply the woman stared blankly at

nothing in particular.

No matter how he looked at it who it was, for Rion, such a thing was only vile.

“...That was great.”

After some time, the woman, who for a while looked like a listless corpse, spoke.

“Great?”

“Even though you’re just a kid... To bring so much pleasure.”

“...Is that so?”

“Yeah.”

“I wouldn’t know about such things.”

After returning to the mansion, Rion was swarmed by the maids who were waiting for this opportunity. This one was one of those he created a relationship with way back before leaving for the Academy.

Delaying them for days with all kinds of reasons, he was accompanying them one at a time. But even so, the women he had such ties to numbered five. This turned the situation into having one visitor nearly every night.

Although at first, he thought it couldn’t be helped, the maids’ desire didn’t subside and continued unquenched day after day.

Rion, getting irritated by this, began to treat them more roughly, however, that just brought them more pleasure and their advances showed no signs of stopping.

He felt defiled every day and this made him turn dejected whenever the nighttime arrived.

But even so, what made him carry on was...

“I was designated to attend the tea party held by House Aqusmea.”

...the information that he would obtain.

“...Since when had Erwin-sama established a connection with that House?”

“It seems that it was Viscount Austin who made a move first. I heard that from Will.”

“The vassal family, of their own accord?”

“Even I was surprised. Furthermore, to think Aquasmeas would accept the invitation. If Milady heard of such a thing happening...”

Ignoring Vincent, who was the legitimate heir, and inviting the son of a concubine to a tea party. There’s no way Milady, who was doting on her son, would forgive such a thing.

Everyone residing in the mansion knew that. And despite knowing that, Will still accepted the invitation.

Rion thought that while he was away, the situation in the estate was already turning for the worse and that made his chest hurt.

“Is Erwin-sama delighted by that turn of events?”

“He is. That’s what I think.”

“Is that so...”

That news was not good. It meant that Erwin’s personality was unscrupulous and he had no qualms a thing about disregarding the legitimate heir, even being only a son of a concubine.

“Don’t tell others about this, okay?”

This “Don’t tell others about this okay?” would lead to sleeping together with her more often. If the maid was to be asked, it looked like they were conspiring together, but he had no such thoughts.

“Of course.”

“Erwin-sama is holding a grudge, you know?”

“Holding a grudge?”

“Against the lord who separated him from his mother and doesn’t even care enough to rein in Milady, who is treating them harshly.”

“...But I heard her social status was not very high?”

If Rion was to be asked, aside from being separated, Erwin was living a life free of inconvenience being surrounded by personal servants. What was he displeased about?

“That’s right. She was formerly a maid just like me from a family of baronets.”

“A single generation noble... It’s surprising that she was able to become a maid with just that.”

For the maids of the Marquess house, it would be natural to think that their family background was nobility. A baronet was someone who was given a peerage due to achievements, that title could not be inherited. Only the person himself would be given aristocratic treatment.

“That reaction... Rion is yet to meet her, right?”

“I made sure not to approach those who are purposely separated.”

“Well that certainly makes sense with your position. But she was very beautiful, you know? To the point that even fellow women such as me were surprised.”

“So, Marquess had planned to take her from the very beginning?”

“Wrong. Her family had used money and connections in order to ensure she had been hired. It seems her family was a successful merchant house and rumors say that they used a considerable amount of funds in order to make their daughter a maid.”

“...Gaining a foothold by making her a Marquess concubine.”

“Although I can’t say for certain, I think the same. No matter how beautiful she has been, there’s no way Lord would lay his hands on her without a reason.”

The Marquess loves his wife but also fear her at the same time. Those who work inside the mansion acknowledged this as a fact. It was common knowledge to the point that Rion, who only just started working in the mansion, was surprised by the existence of

a concubine.

“...It’s fine to think that there’s an ambition behind it, right?”

“Yes, but even if there wasn’t, wouldn’t the result be the same? I also think that, while it’s commendable that Rion is driven by a sense of duty, it would be better to think about the situation a little more carefully.”

“Is that the case?”

“Yeah”

“I’d rather not, I’m only allowed to serve here because of Vincent-sama.”

Rion didn’t want to seriously ponder it. Especially because the maid was only enjoying playing with fire and wasn’t really Vincent’s ally.

Probably, if she was to be asked, she would most likely think that Erwin was a more fitting successor. This was why Rion answered in a safe way.

“That is the case, isn’t it.”

“Things, that will happen, will happen, my position only gives me the right to think so much.”

“Well, even if he is disinherited, it should not bring troubles to your life. “

“...Yes.”

With each new piece of information obtained, Rion was again reminded that the situation in the mansion was really turning bad.

He had to work not only on the situation in the Royal Academy, but also on the developments at home, or more specifically, throughout the sphere of influence of the House. However, even knowing that, Rion’s position did not allow for such things.

And even if his position did allow it, Rion had only one body. He was reminded of his own limitations.

It was necessary for him to find allies. Someone who would cooperate with him.

What had to be done to find someone like that? In the meantime, Rion thought only of this.

Chapter 11

Devising a method of defeating a rival

What Rion understood after comparing the different information he obtained from the maids was that the scheme to make Erwin the Windhill's successor had more supporters among the vassal families than just Viscount Austin

The worst news of all was that the plot was also backed by the House Aqusmea.

One couldn't deny other houses' say in this matter. The three families acted as the support of the royals. Together they constituted the strength of the kingdom.

The succession of a Marquess was never a purely internal issue, which is why having House Gran Flamm influence the outcome was nothing unusual.

At the same time the judgment of the royal family would also be influenced by the opinions of the other marquess houses.

If the House Aqusmea had a problem with the Windhill's successor, the king could not brush it off. He had to look into the reasons and if he found something really undesirable, he would make his position clear to the House Windhill indirectly.

No matter how doting the parents were, could their pledge of loyalty allow for ignoring the opinion of the royal family? For Rion, that was still an open question. After all, Marquess Windhill was the one to put Vincent in his current place while placing great value on relations with other Houses.

Judging by the situation it was likely the preparations to have Erwin to replace Vincent were already in place.

With this turn of events, rather than focusing on building up Vincent's reputation, Rion was cornered into obtaining information in order to defend against the opposition's offensive.

Although a mere valet like Rion could do almost nothing in this situation, he still didn't want to give up and do nothing. To him Vincent was a benefactor. Furthermore, he was

among the few people to truly think that Vincent was suitable material for a lord of the marquess house.

Rion was constantly racking his brain thinking about what to do with the current deadlock of a situation but no matter how much he tried, he could formulate no excellent plans.

That's why he decided to just observe the surroundings to try and find inspiration.

"Ain, are you aiming for the boss' position?"

"Eh? N-no, that's absurd. There's no way I would aim for leader's position."

Being asked such a thing it was obvious a person would tremble. Ain, who found himself on thin ice, was seriously flustered.

"Ah, I didn't mean it that way."

"...Then, what did that mean?"

"If there is someone who's aiming to become a boss and his value is even higher than that of the boss himself, what should the boss do in that situation?"

"He should kill him shouldn't he? After all dead people can't aim for anything."

"I guess it really leads to that..."

It's not as though Rion came to terms with assassination, he just expected to get these kinds of answers when asking. There would be no mistake when it came to the scoundrels of the slums.

However, that solution was not completely wrong either. It was true, those who died could never succeed anything.

The reason why Rion has yet to implement this plan was because there was another self in Rion who thought of the consequences. If the rival threatening the position was suddenly assassinated, Vincent's innocence would be doubted as a matter of course. His reputation was certain to fall to the absolute lowest point.

That doubt would also mean that even after his succession, only troubles would await.

House Windhill's influence might also be damaged by such action.

Rion didn't want for any of this to happen.

"If killing him is not an option, what should he do?"

"Threaten him."

As expected, Ain's answers would amount to illegal acts.

".....If he doesn't listen? Rather, obviously he won't, this is a person aiming for the boss' position."

"That's right, isn't it... I will threaten him using a weaknesses that will make him give up on the position of the boss."

"...If there's none?"

"Ah no, all human have at least one."

"Hypothetically speaking, if there's none?"

"He's a troublesome opponent, isn't he?... If there's none, then make one. If he's a man then lead him into a female's honey trap and make him completely fall to ruin with gambling."

Ain's answers always led to cruel outcomes. But even so, he was not completely wrong. If it was about crushing a person down, lip service wouldn't do.

"Thanks. It's a good reference."

"No problem. So who is th—"

"What?"

"It seems the preparations are already done."

"Oh, I see. Then, enter."

"Understood."

Obtaining Rion's permission, Ain called people waiting outside the room. A group of females wearing dresses in different colors entered. They were courtesans...

The main reason why Rion came to the slums was this. He brought clothes that Ariel outgrew, that were about to be disposed, for them to wear.

With just putting them on, the women's aura turned rather high class.

Because those were clothes of a lady from an aristocratic family, each piece was quite expensive on its own. It was evident that the courtesans themselves lost to their dresses.

"...Isn't it a bit..."

"It really is. Even I can tell."

"I know right? So, we can't use this."

"Ah no... If we made it a little more..."

"A little more?"

"They'll be taking it off anyway, so let's just remove the gaudy bits. If you like, should they just wear the ones with the most transparent fabrics?"

Rion imagined Ain's idea in his head. A girl who is wearing a see-through dress on her bare body.

"...Isn't that too lascivious?"

"They're prostitutes, that much is to be expected."

"Well, you're right. Is there anyone who can adjust the dresses?"

"We'll have them do it."

"Well then, make it so. It would be even better if they could make multiple dresses from one."

"Understood. Well then, with this the clothing part is done."

“Yeah.”

Announcing the end of the issue of their clothing, the courtesans were ordered to leave the room but they did not.

Rion understood their intentions in just one glance. Each and every one of them headed towards him and tried to appeal to him acting coquettish. Their aim was to make the boss think better of them

They were not successful of course. The girls couldn't know that Rion felt repulsed by suggestive advances by women.

Not even catching his gaze they caused him to knit his eyebrows and when they realized that, the women regretfully left the room.

Relieved with the prostitutes gone Rion let out a light sigh. That showed just how much of a burden the girls' attitude was for Rion.

“Confirm how much time will it take to finish making the dresses.”

“Understood.”

“The building has improved more than I imagined. Maintain that. Frequently wash the towels you use, always practice hygiene.”

The towels were also something the Windhill manor has disposed off. Though it was already garbage for the aristocratic estate, in slums that kind of quality was first-class.

“Understood. I have already secured the person in charge of that.”

“That's fast.”

“Well, of course, When they were told that the people who'll do the cleaning and laundry would be rewarded with money, many volunteered.”

“Did you pick the best?”

“Well yeah, I picked an unusually diligent guy for this neighborhood.”

“That's good. How about the water-heater?”

“It would take a bit more time. But... , Ah never mind.....”

“What is it? If there’s something you are bothered about, spill it.”

“...That, isn’t that too luxurious? For them to even use a hot bath.”

It was indeed luxurious. Washing the body with hot water. There was no one to experience such thing in the slums if one excluded the fallen nobility. Actually it was also the same with the main street of the city.

However, Rion considered this extravagance an extra service in itself. Besides, the water heater also had another purpose.

“If we secure the spot and person to boil the water for a hot bath, it won’t be luxurious anymore. Also, there will be refuse you will have to burn, so that it won’t rot.”

“Well...”

“Decreasing the amount of garbage and disinfecting the water will be purely beneficial if you put aside labor involved. However, make sure never to cause a fire.”

In light of Rion’s memories of the other world, the situation of the slum area was horrible. It was a place that would be considered uninhabitable to people. He thought of this plans as a way of coming to terms with the situation. At the place of the hot bath one could use garbage as a source of fire.

“Understood. I will excavate another hole on the site and pave the surroundings. With this, the fire should not escape.”

“That’s right. It will be troublesome work but somehow keep it up.”

“We have no problem with that.”

“Is that the case?”

“If they receive money for it, won’t it be a problem to the applicant...”

“They’re jobless after all.”

The usual way of getting money in exchange for hard labor was not as good as this.

And other activities carry the risk of getting caught by the city watch, even if not life threatening.

So for the dwellers of the slum, Rion's job offers were delicious opportunities.

"After that, it's the service training, huh? How is that going?"

"If you were to ask me, it's considerably good."

"What did the person teaching them say?"

"All the members must pass. But a lot of courtesans dislike it for being troublesome."

"...So the problem is the willingness. We don't have the time to wait for everyone of them to pass. Differentiate the income of those who pass and those who don't. Ah, rather, let's designate their salaries by using a rankings list."

"Ranking list?"

"Let's make a ranking board based on their popularity and display it on the reception desk."

Was there something like a picture? If only those existed, we could line them up as well, thought the part, that was Ryou. That existence was still a minor and although its ideas were crude, for the the people of the slum they were new and original.

"What should we do with those lists?"

"Offer the customers to pick from them. Of course, that option will carry an extra charge."

"...I will think of how to do it."

The idea was fine. However, there was also the problem of how the most unpopular courtesan would gather customers. Fine tuning the details would be for Ain and the others to think about.

"If preparations are finished, we can finally start. Just like with the renovation, we need a person to spread the news by word of mouth."

“Understood. However, before that...”

“What is it?”

“It would be more advisable to do something about the quality of the women. Even if we manage to spread the good word over a period of time, if the customers think of that reputation as a lie, then it won’t be...”

“Aren’t we doing all this for that to not happen?”

“Ah no, this is not about the discipline, but about the appearance.”

“...Are they still not good enough?”

For some reason, Rion was poor when it came to judging people’s looks. Although he could do slightly better with Ryou’s point of view, he chose not to use it. Mainly because he hated judging people by the appearance.

“Compared to boss, all of them are...”

Rion’s gaze immediately turned icy. He hated hearing that.

“I apologize.”

“...By doing something about it, you meant?”

“Figuring out a way to obtain new women of a good quality.”

“...Scouting?”

“Yes? What is that? That scou-something?”

“Upon seeing a beautiful woman, you would approach them and ask “won’t you become a courtesan?”...Never mind, we can’t do that anyway.”

“Well...”

“Then, snatching targets out of other shops... Is no good either, right? This is not the time to aggravate the situation after all.”

“Yes.”

“Then, what should we do?”

“If you allow me to use money, then I will be able to procure them the usual way.”

“Is that so? You can procure them as usual, huh? Incidentally, how do you do it?”

“One is buying them from houses with financial problems, purchasing those who are about to become slaves.”

“...So it's really that... It seems expensive.”

Forcefully cramming Ryou's morality back into a corner of his mind, Rion continued the conversation.

“In a way. Well in regards to the quality, wouldn't it be enough for it to be so-so at the start?”

“Would it?”

“The customers wouldn't expect that much from the slum courtesans. One of the reasons for visiting is the low price anyway.”

“Then if it's so-so, you think the assessment of those who expected nothing rise, don't you?”

“Yes.”

“Alright. Permission granted.”

Rion completely forgot his main objective and began seriously working as a boss of his organization in the slums.



The first and foremost reason why Rion came to seize the reins of power in the slums was to prevent any possible inconvenience to Vincent. If the local gangs knew that he was working at a marquess estate and on top of that even working for the heir, they were certain to come after him as a good source of money.

There was also the possibility that Rion's origins as an orphan from the slums becoming public knowledge would damage Vincent's reputation. So in summary, his takeover was to defend both of them from multiple risks.

However if that only was the case, then when he was to display his power he should carefully control it. After all, there was also another reason why Rion strove to expand his own sphere of influence.

It was to build up public opinion. The slum residents were intended to be the base for that.

It was a considerably outrageous plan. But even so, if the possibility of pulling it off existed, there would be no way that Rion would not try it.

The things he could do by himself, didn't add up to much. So he clung to the thought that even if it contradicted his other activities, as long as there was at least a minuscule chance of success, no matter how difficult the scheme he had to try and make it happen.

And so, he once again took an independent action searching for a clue to break this deadlock in the Windhill's succession fight.

The Marquess owned a mansion of vast size in the capital.

It was not just a estate befitting a family of that rank to reside in. There also was a chivalric order stationed on site to guard them, along with the numerous servants and their dependents living there and numerous buildings located within the boundaries.

Some of the area was covered with abundant vegetation and thickly growing trees and although calling it a forest would be an exaggeration, that wood glade was wide enough to make such an impression on people.

Rion was currently heading towards that area which made it unthinkable that one was still in the capital when being surrounded by so many tall trees.

Although there was a carefully maintained path that reminded it wasn't really a natural forest, at the moment, he was heading to a place away from it's course.

It was a place people came to only once a year, where even the grasses grown tall, reinforcing the natural ambiance.

Rion's objective was not a stroll to admire mother nature. He wanted to explore the building at the end of it.

Before long, he could finally see it behind the trees and it was an even larger than he expected.

Crossing the courtyard in order to check its exterior out, he also planned to go around to opposite side but...

"Who's there!?"

A sudden voice inquiring about the intruder was raised. It seemed there was a person hidden in the shadow of a tree that he failed to notice.

"I apologize for startling you. I only came here to explore places I haven't seen yet."

He answered with a phrase he had prepared beforehand with a composed mask on his face, while taking a step forward.

He saw a female figure sitting next to a table in a garden. She looked like a refined lady having tea.

Although his exterior didn't show it, in his mind he was strongly reflecting on the failure to notice all that.

"...May I know who you are?"

The tone of the lady suddenly changed.

"Madam, I am employed as a valet in the manor."

"...Why are you here?"

"I was taking a stroll in the glade."

"Taking a stroll?"

"I wanted to roam around the areas of the estate grounds I haven't explored yet, so I have made free time for it and here I am."

“...Just because of that, you stumbled upon this place?”

“...Hard to believe, isn't it? Madam, your suspicion is reasonable. It was due to being curious why was this place being avoided by people and being stared at coldly by the passersby. Also other people are still working, so I took the opportunity.”

He acted out the words prepared beforehand.

“I see. What is your name?”

“It's Rion, madam.”

“What is the work you do?”

“I employed as Vincent-sama's personal valet.”

“Oh, is that the case? That's... Unfortunate. How should I say this, won't you be scolded?”

She tilted her head a little with an innocent smile. Although she looked considerably older than Rion, one would normally see her gestures as lovely. As long as it was just a normal person.

“No, madam. Besides, all work has its own hardships.”

“You are diligent, are you not? Do you perhaps know who I am?”

“Madam, I apologize. I do not.”

“There's no need to humble yourself that much.”

“That may be so, however in my judgement you are not an employee.”

“Why do you think so?”

“There is no servant in here that would enjoy a tea in the garden.”

“...Ah, indeed, However, Rion-kun is wandering aimlessly during the day as well even though he is just a servant.”

“...That’s right, isn’t it.”

Her attitude was truly getting over-familiar. It was the first time that Rion was treated in such a way.

“Sit beside me. I will prepare more tea.”

“I have to refuse. I am fine as I am.”

“But I want you to keep me company for a conversation. I’m bored all alone after all...”

This time she showed a downcast, melancholic expression. No longer charming, the woman’s aura turned lonesome.

“Madam, I can listen to you while remaining upright.”

“It would be difficult for me to talk that way. Please, sit beside me.”

“.....As you wish.”

“That too, can’t you talk in a more relaxed way?”

“...I shall try.”

“If you like, take a drink. Because you just walked this far, you must be thirsty, no?”

Saying that, the woman offered the cup she drank from not long ago. As far as Rion knew, it was a gesture somewhat removed from common sense.

“I am fine.”

“It’s because I have drank from it, isn’t it? As I thought, I should prepare more tea.”

“No, I’m fine.”

“Jeez, well then, this is an order. Drink tea with me.”

“...If you really insist, then I shall prepare it.”

“You’re going to prepare it?”

“I am a valet after all.”

“...I wonder if it's really something a valet usually does?”

Normal valets didn't. Rion was doing it so that the maids didn't have to approach Vincent.

“Is it fine for me to enter the house in order to prepare the utensils and hot water?”

“...That's a good question, isn't it? It's something that should be entrusted to a maid.”

“Are there none here?”

“I am living alone so that no one would intrude on me during moments like this.”

“I apologize for being rude.”

“It's fine. It's seldom that I can converse with someone from the main residence after all.”

Again, the woman's face flashed solitude.

The ambiance changed again impacting the mood. Again, a normal person thrown off by such a change would feel attracted to her and her aura.

“Have you ever met Erwin before?”

“I have not.”

“I see.”

“With that way of addressing Erwin-sama, is it possible that madam is Erwin-sama's mother?”

Rion asked, but he already knew who he was dealing with from the very start. It was the Lord's former concubine, Julia. He purposely came here to see her.

“Yes, that's right.”

“Then I must apologize for my impoliteness so far.”

Saying such, Rion quickly stood up from his seat. Watching it with a lonesome face, Julia asked

“Are you not allowed to speak with concubines?”

“No. I stood up because me sharing a table with madam was impertinent.”

“...You are really diligent, are you not?”

“It’s something to be expected of other valets as well.”

“I think it would’ve been better if Erwin’s valet was like you. You are close in age, you would be a good companion.”

“That would be impossible.”

“Oh, do you dislike the idea of being Erwin’s valet?”

“My feelings are irrelevant, I’m certain the environment wouldn’t permit it.”

“.....You are relied on a lot, are you not?”

The conversation paused for a bit. While trying to keep up the appearance of dialogue Rion was trying to decipher the meaning behind those words.

“Madam, I did not mean it that way, I was trying to say that Erwin-sama’s entourage would not permit such a thing.”

“I see...”

“Someone like me is nothing next to Erwin-sama, a superior valet with an abundance of experience is a better fit for him.”

Actually, it was sarcasm aimed at Will but Julia didn’t notice that.

“I’m afraid Will-san might not be entirely superior.....”

“Is there some kind of problem?”

“...Well it’s not something I would consult with Rion. It’s a personal problem of mine.”

That last remark seemed meaningful but despite being curious what it was about...

“Is that the case. Well then, I’ll forget I heard anything.”

“Forget?”

“An unnecessary information might lead to prejudice. Such things are never good.”

“...Indeed.”

Rion ended the conversation suggesting he didn’t care about the story at all.

“Well then, I believe it’s time for me to return.”

“I see... Uhm?”

“Yes. What is it?”

“Though it’s an unreasonable demand to a valet, won’t you come here again sometimes?”

“That, I cannot promise. Currently Vincent-sama is attending the Royal Academy. The only reason why I’m back at the mansion is the school break.”

“Ah, that is right. Well then, It would be fine if it’s just during those breaks. I will always be here after all and I would like to know various things about the main house.”

“...If, like today, I have the time.”

After pretending to think about it, Rion answered back.

“Jeez, you are too diligent. As I thought, I really want you as Erwin’s valet. And if that is impossible, I at least want you to get along with him. Erwin will come to school next year as well so, when that happens, please lend him your strength.”

“Is that so. Madam, although I do not know if he would ever need my assistance, I shall try if it’s something that I can do.”

“That is fine. I’m counting on you.”

Julia stood up, suddenly approached Rion and held his hand with a serious expression on her face. Her blue eyes were staring at him intently.

“If it’s within my means.”

Rion did not show any noticeable reaction to Julia’s behavior.

“...Yes.”

...And another pause. Rion was observing the woman making such gestures one after another. Although being able to talk with her was an unexpected event, it was an opportunity that he would not let slide.

“Well then, I have to excuse myself.”

“My name is...”

“I know, madam.”

“I see. So that’s why you did not ask.”

“Not at all. Demanding an aristocrat’s name is reckless and rude.”

“Is that really the case?”

“I remember it being a part of a valet’s code of conduct.”

“I see... Is calling a noble by name the same, perhaps?”

“A commoner calling a noble by name would bring discomfort, would it not?”

“That’s right, isn’t it? However, if it’s Rion, I’m fine with it.”

“...I understand. Well then, Julia-sama. Please excuse me.”

“Yeah, see you again.”

Not replying to that, Rion turned and made his way back.

Getting rid of the mask he was keeping up earlier, his expression returned to that he wore when returning from the slums, a fearless face.

Although he was acting the whole time, it was the same with Julia. Rion understood that immediately after meeting her.

He was currently wearing a black eye patch but she immediately accepted that such a suspicious person was serving as a valet. Therefore it was obvious she was already aware of his existence from the very beginning. And yet, she acted as if she didn't and talked to him while feigning ignorance.

Julia clearly realized the worth of her looks and used them with full awareness of the effects.

Flattery was prominent within the eyes gazing on him, but Rion didn't miss the odd look filled with disdain and other complicated emotions hidden underneath it all. Because that was something that he had seen numerous times before.

Any remaining sympathy he had for Julia dissipated. Her current situation was what she desired and furthermore she was taking action to realize her ambition.

Rion came to the conclusion that she was an enemy. That being the case, there was now a need to search for her weakness. And when he began to ponder that it looked as though finding one would not prove to be difficult.

Julia was seducing other people and using them. Surely, there was some sort of wickedness existing in there. After all Rion knew everything about it, he was doing the same thing.

Chapter 12

Having a distinct appearance is of grave importance in Drama

Rion spent the remaining days of his break preparing for the return to the Academy. For him, these holidays brought fairly satisfying results.

He only visited Julia, the Lord's concubine and mother of Erwin once after their first meeting.

Regardless if his visits were to be seldom or frequent, his motives would still be mistrusted. After promising to somehow make time and meet her, the ones residing in his body have decided to do that only one more time.

On their second meeting, he came to the garden and had a conversation with her. It was similar to the first time, the subjects touched on were roughly the same as well. Julia praised Rion's sincerity and brought the topic of wanting him to get along with Erwin.

Saying that her everyday life was full of boredom she wanted to talk about the things in the main house to ease her sadness. When it came to that, even though Rion's loyalty to Vincent was on full display, he offered answers that Julia wished for as much as possible.

Although he was indicating the possibility of being pulled in as their ally, he was also making them think that doing so would not be simple. He aimed for a delicate impression that he couldn't get too close, but he would find severing all relations very regrettable.

The results were better than expected

After all, Julia's confidence in her own beauty resulted in her being flustered that Rion showed no reaction to her charms.

To Rion, her efforts at seduction weren't even amusing. She was indeed a rare beauty,

but her behavior was something he had experienced a lot before.

After concluding that an attempt to entrap him was indeed underway, his assessment of Julia fell down a level, but outwardly he pretended to be a thick-headed child still perplexed about those unusual emotions.

Because Rion's acting was pretty good, Julia, judging by those reactions, felt she got a response.

Rion, accordingly, felt he got a reaction from her. For now, his aim was roughly achieved. It would now be easier to manage the aftermath of Erwin's assassination or to obtain a bargaining chip to force him to withdraw from the succession conflict. Just thinking about it was inadvertently drawing a smile on his face.

—and when she saw Rion's smile.

“What are you smiling about? Do you find not having to meet me anymore so pleasant?”

“I-It hurts.”

Ariel was pinching his mouth with all her might.

“Haa... The days will be boring again.”

“Y-Yes”

“What?”

“M-My mouth.”

“No.”

“Uu... Y-your fingers.”

“...I guess there's no choice.”

Although what she meant by “there's no choice” was unclear, Ariel let go of Rion's lips. Without delay, he offered a handkerchief.

“What?”

“Milady... Your fingers have gotten dirty.”

“Fingers?”

Ariel shot a glance at her fingers and noticed that they were slightly wet from Rion’s saliva.

“...I’m fine with it.”

“Milady...”

“...I guess it can’t be helped.”

Taking the handkerchief she wiped her fingers lightly and raised it towards Rion’s mouth.

“I-I will do it myself.”

“I see. Then do so.”

After taking the handkerchief from Ariel’s hands, Rion wiped his own mouth while Ariel watched his actions intently.

“Is there something wrong?”

“When will you return?”

“By the end of the year, I expect.”

“I see. That’s quite a while.”

“That’s right, isn’t it.”

“...Then, as punishment...”

“Eh? Why?”

Did he do something that deserved punishment during the conversation? He couldn’t

recall such a thing.

“It’s a punishment for making me suffer boredom for so long.”

“...I understand.”

Rion wondered briefly whether that was even within his remit but he never voiced the thought. He was already programmed never to oppose Ariel. The one who imprinted that into him was of course... Ariel herself.

“As a punishment, you must write me letters.”

“Letters?”

“Reports about the events in the Royal Academy.”

“Oh, so it’s about that.”

“That’s right.”

Unfortunately, what both of them meant by “that” was very different.

Ariel wanted to be told about all kinds of things by making Rion her informant. But he misunderstood and came to a conclusion that she wanted information about the Crown Prince.

This misunderstanding, at a later date, was going to make Ariel displeased, but that story would be for another time.

“Are you done preparing your bags?”

“Yes, mostly.”

“...Then why are you still not wearing the new knight’s attire that I prepared?”

Ariel complained while looking at the set of clothes hanging on the wall. It was black, laced with silver and brand new.

“I was thinking of wearing it on the day of our return to the Royal Academy.”

“Really?”

“Yes milady.”

“Do you like it?”

“Of course. Surprisingly even the size was spot on.”

“Well of course. I measured it properly.”

“...Erm, when...?”

Rion had no memories of that happening.

“It was while you were asleep.”

“Milady?”

“Well If I did it when you have been awake, you would’ve known that I was preparing clothes for you.”

“That is true but...”

“If I haven’t, it wouldn’t be a surprise for Rion at all.”

“I see... I was completely unaware of it.”

The failure to wake up while being subjected to such a thing despite forging his body so hard made Rion depressed but...

“Well, I did use a sleeping drug.”

“...Yes?”

“After all, wouldn’t it be exposed if you woke up in the process?”

“...It would... wouldn’t it.”

Rion would never complain about whatever Ariel did to him. But this made him reflect on his carelessness in failing to notice that he was given a sleeping drug.

“I believe with this we’re done discussing that subject. If you are finished with the baggage prepare some tea for me. I’ll have it in the garden. Let’s talk there.”

“Understood milady. I will arrange it immediately.”

As if treasuring their remaining time, Rion and Ariel spent their time together like this every day while completely disregarding the suspicions regarding their relations.

Rion was not blind to the attitude from their surroundings, but even so he still never refused Ariel’s invitation.

What the two regretted was not how little vacation time remained, but for how long they would be separated next. But they weren’t aware of that yet.

As the two embraces their feelings, not even realizing, the relationship of the two continues. Not getting any closer nor getting far from it.



After the holiday break, the semester would start with an immediate exam.

For the freshmen, it would be their first examination. Because it was the first time that the academic ability of each student was on display, in front of the bulletin board where a score based ranking list was posted numerous students gathered.

“H-hey.”

Among them, one raised his voice. Knowing the reason behind that, the crowd immediately dispersed.

The vacated space was taken by three handsome and beautiful, although still very young people.

The young lord with the radiant blonde hair and crimson eyes was Arnold Highland, the Crown Prince of the Kingdom. The male student standing next to him with blonde hair and blue eyes was Lancelot Minister and the lady, with vivid reddish-brown hair and brown eyes, was the eldest daughter of the House Fatillas, Charlotte Lanchester.

With the three of them making an appearance together, it was natural for the surrounding students to move out of their path in panic.

“So Arnold was reliably first, huh? As expected of you.”

Looking at the ranking table posted on the bulletin board, Lancelot voiced his admiration.

“Oh my, I, and even Lancelot have lost.”

In contrast to that, Charlotte voiced her displeasure.

“I’m not the only one, okay?”

“...That’s right, isn’t it. Fuun~ *not just by the appearance*, huh?”

Charlotte’s gaze was fixed on the name of the person ranked under the name of Arnold. It was Maria Theodore.

“Speaking of the devil...”

Approaching from the hallway, a female student came towards the board. Framed by the light coming from the windows, with her long, black hair outstretched, she was dazzling. With her cerulean eyes and pure white skin even by looking from afar, one would recognize her as a beauty.

It was Maria, and when she noticed Lancelot her face bloomed in a smile.

Though her delicate face was doll-like already, when a smile brightened it, her charm turned angelic. The surrounding male students could only sigh in admiration while the females could only groan.

“Yo, Maria.”

“Lancelot-sama.”

“What’s the matter? I told you that it’s fine to drop the honorifics, did I not?”

“You did, but...”

Right after that, Maria’s face became cloudy. Just from that expression, Lancelot was able to guess the reason.

“Did someone say something to you?”

“It wasn’t anything bad, I was told that it would be good for me to practice etiquette.”

“Hou... Even though I told you that it’s fine, someone had the guts to protest?”

“That is...”

“Who is it? Just tell me the name and I’ll rebuke them strictly.”

“That person was gentle about it, so.....”

Maria already knew what the meaning of the “Strictly” that Lancelot said was and Lancelot immediately knew that Maria was trying to cover up for the person.

“Maria is really kind. However, I can’t put up with you calling me in such a refined manner.”

“...I understand. Good afternoon, Lancelot. Is this way fine?”

“Yeah. That’s just fine. However, Maria is really amazing, huh?”

“Eh?”

“Your score. You came to see the results, did you not?”

“Ah, that’s right.”

Maria came towards the vacated spot where Lancelot was standing. After looking at the scoreboard and finding her name, she pouted.

“...I lost.”

“Oh? Maria is unsatisfied with being second?”

“I worked hard after all.”

“But only placing second, huh? Well, the person in first place was...”

“Would there be a problem if I finished first?”

Lancelot hesitated to answer Maria's thoughtless question.

"...Maria, it would be good for you to remember the name of the Crown Prince."

"Eh? Ah!"

"Crown Prince Arnold was the best in the Academy and person himself stands in front of you."

Hearing Lancelot's explanation, Maria's face was dyed red and her body became stiff.

"...Is my face, perhaps, that strange?"

The Crown Prince asked in a cold voice.

"Eh?"

"I'm asking you if it's really something for a woman to be surprised about."

"...No, I think it is very dreamy. I might've been surprised due to that."

"What?"

"Ah, excuse my rudeness. It slipped from my mouth."

"...You're a weird woman."

Arnold spoke looking astounded. Maria, hearing that, smiled. She thought that the starting point was perfect, something the surrounding people were not aware of.

"...Are you really happy with being called a weird woman?"

"Yes?"

"You smiled just now."

"A-Ah, I figured that I heard Arnold-sama's real feelings, so I have become happy."

"...You."

Arnold intently stared at Maria as if looking at a weird creature. She caught his gaze with a bashful look.

The two of them stood in silence again.

“Oh well, dealing with Maria, I guess even Arnold’s manners will go awry.”

Lancelot smashed that mood. Without a doubt, it was on purpose.

“...My manners weren’t really affected.”

“Is that so? Well putting that aside, how about we drink some tea to celebrate the results?”

“How did it lead to that?”

“Isn’t that fine? It’s the gathering of the four highest scorers of the Academy.”

“Does that mean that she is included?”

Charlotte cut into the conversation sounding displeased.

“It does, why?”

“Don’t tell me, you’ll let her enter the lounge as well?”

“That was the plan, why?”

“Lancelot, this woman is a commoner, you know?”

The “Lounge” that Charlotte was talking about was a special room for people of high status. Officially it was a club room of the Socializing Club the purpose of which was undefined.

“There is no rule stating that commoners are forbidden to enter.”

“That’s true, but... Arnold?”

“...Do what you want.”

“Are you sure?”

For Charlotte his reply was unexpected. She thought that Crown prince Arnold would certainly oppose such a suggestion. Not just because Maria was a commoner. She knew that he suffered from extreme shyness to the point of nearly hating crowds.

There’s no way she would let Maria go to the lounge which was his only place to relax.

“Two ayes. It’s decided then.”

That was a godsend for Lancelot. With this, if he invited Maria to the lounge again, Charlotte’s opposition would be overruled, or so it was supposed to be.

“I’m against it.”

“What?”

A new voice suddenly entered the conversation. As Lancelot glanced in its direction and saw Vincent standing there.

Lancelot’s face twisted in an ugly sneer.

“Two ayes and two nays. It’s a draw.”

“...This does not concern you.”

“It does. I also have the right to enter the lounge.”

“Rich coming from someone who had never come there in the first place...”

“I was busy. Besides, I am yet to find the reason to do so.”

“Well then, as I thought, it doesn’t concern you at all, right?”

“Wrong. The lounge is something that was passed to us by our seniors and will be passed down to our juniors in the future. Its traditions are not something we should change on a whim.”

Honoring the established customs was very Vincent-like. Lancelot who was also an aristocrat should originally have had the same thoughts, but...

“...That’s trivial. What’s the use of being chained down by the past?”

He still rejected Vincent’s words.

“I’m not being chained down. I am just cherishing the tradition.”

“You don’t have the qualifications to say that!”

“I do.”

“None at all. You’re a disgrace to the aristocrats.”

“What did you say!?”

“Look at the rankings. Where is your name placed? You’re the only one from the four families missing in the top ten! You’re not even in the twenties. If this is not a disgrace, then what is?”

“.....”

Being told that, Vincent could offer no rebuttal. Full of frustration he could only hang his head in shame.

Lancelot, witnessing that broke into a satisfied smile and continued his verbal assault.

“That’s right. Let’s change the rules of the lounge. Rather than those with higher pedigree let’s make those who really are superior be the ones allowed to enter. If we do that, you won’t have any problems with her entering it.”

“I will not acknowledge such a change!”

“Your opinion is irrelevant. Arnold, what do you think?”

“What!?”

If Arnold accepted Lancelot’s suggestion, Vincent would be left with no recourse. Arnold was royalty, and the future king to boot. There was no way Vincent could go against his opinion.

“...This conversation is worthless. Let those who want to use the room, use it.”

“Arnold?”

“This is a waste of time. If you want to go, just go. If you don’t want to, then don’t. Hurry up and decide.”

“...Then, let’s go.”

The reason why Lancelot was forgiven for calling him without honorifics was because the two of them were close. However, he still couldn’t ignore nor go against the Crown Prince’s decision.

“Your highness! Why would you allow that female student to accompany you!?”

“...What did you say?”

The dispute which was reaching its conclusion was reignited again by Vincent. Furthermore, he did it as if questioning the prince’s decision. Arnold’s face adopted a severe expression.

“Even for a Crown Prince, to ignore something that his predecessors have decided upon... That is...”

Although Vincent raised his voice towards the royal at first, upon realizing Arnold’s displeasure, he was not able to continue his argument to the end.

“Rather than being concerned with others, shouldn’t you do something with yourself first? You could not even deny the words of Lancelot, could you?”

“That...”

“Such a guy is a Windhill...”

“Vincent-sama, I apologize for making you wait.”

In this situation, Rion cut into the conversation by intercepting the words of the Crown Prince. He concluded that letting the confrontation between Vincent and Arnold continue would not be good.

“Rion, right now the Crown Prince is–”

“Sir? Ah, I’m sorry for my rudeness. To think that it would be his majesty himself.”

“...The servants are just like their masters, huh? To think you wouldn’t even recognize the face of your own country’s royal.”

“Ah no, the face was familiar. However, I was thinking it must have been a different person. “

“What did you say?”

“According to rumors Crown Prince Arnold has been wise ever since he was a child. Someone who ignores the admonishments of his retainers cannot be called that, so I thought it must have been a different person.”

A severe sarcasm towards the royalty. The surroundings exploded with murmurs. and Arnold, being at the receiving end displayed surprise mixed with other complicated feelings while glaring at Rion.

“...You bastard!”

“Rion!”

Along with his voice, Vincent’s fist flew towards Rion’s face. Flat-footed by this Rion fell down without having to act.

“Such a thing, towards his highness!”

“How cruel!”

“Wha!?”

The one who shouted at Vincent who was scolding Rion was Maria.

“How cruel! Rion faced the Crown Prince for your sake, you know!?”

“Such a thing was unforgivable.”

“To that Rion, to do such a thing! You are the worst!”

“What did you say!?”

“Rion-kun, it’s all right!”

As expected Vincent would be furious with such a manner of speech but in that moment, Maria turned her back on him and rushed towards Rion lying on the floor.

“I will heal your injury now.”

“...It’s unnecessary.”

It wasn’t really an injury, just a few scratches on the lips. And even if it was worse, Maria’s healing would still be unwarranted.

“If I do, it will close on its own.”

“That’s why healing magic is not needed.”

“But...”

This time, it was Maria’s turn to be ignored. Shaking off her arms and standing, Rion came towards Vincent and knelt, bowing his head.

“My lord, I apologize for my behavior.”

“...No need. Just understand that an insult towards his highness is an insult to me as well.”

“Understood sir. I will remember it well.”

“That’s fine for me. But...”

“...Of course.”

At Vincent’s words, Rion immediately stood up and headed towards Arnold only to kneel down again.

“Sire, I am aware that my conduct is not something that could be forgiven with just an apology. I will accept any form of punishment, what are your orders? “

“...Well then. Die.”

“As you wish, majesty.”

Saying so Rion already had a dagger in his hands.

He pointed the tip towards himself, and without hesitation, stabbed himself. The fluid, graceful movements made everyone forget to stop him and only watch in a stunned surprise.

“...Wha!?”

The first person to come to his senses was the one standing in front of him, crown prince Arnold. Seeing the blood flowing from Rion’s body Arnold’s mind sobered up.

Hearing his surprised voice even the surrounding people became aware of what was happening.

“Ri-Rion-kun!”

Maria desperately rushed towards Rion who seemed to be suffering.

“It’s going to be fine! Rion-kun! Pull yourself together!”

Hugging Rion in her arms, Maria cried those words and in reply...

“...B-Be... Silent. D-Don’t... tou... ch me.”

Rion said coldly.

“What are you saying!?”

“...Th-This is, a pu-punishment..... , I-I must d-die...”

“Don’t say such a stupid thing! Arnold-sama!”

“...Y-yeah?”

“Forgive him, hurry up!”

This was also disrespectful coming from Maria, but no one admonished her. It was not the time to be concerned with such things.

“I-I understand. I forgive you.”

As told by Maria, the Crown Prince uttered words of reprieve.

With this, Rion’s sin was forgiven even if it was not Arnold’s intention for things to turn out this way. The one who steered things in that direction was actually Rion.

“Now then, you don’t have to die anymore. I will heal you, so...”

“Th-There’s n-no, need.”

“What are you saying!?”

At the same time as Maria yelled, a gentle wind glided onto Rion’s body. Its radiance was steadily increasing and enveloped him completely.

And when that light died down, Rion exhaling sharply once, stood up as if nothing happened.

“...R-Rion-kun?”

“I apologize for making you worry. However, there was already someone else to heal me.”

It was the tone of voice of the usual Rion. Although the surroundings seemed to be at a loss with that, his knight’s attire was still stained with blood confirming that what had happened before was indeed real.

“Well then, I will excuse myself.”

“Wait!”

Even after offering his gratitude and separating away, Arnold still called out to him.

“Your Highness? Is there anything else you need?”

“...Ah... no... nothing.”

However, Arnold despite calling him, was not able to put his thoughts into his words. Even disregarding facial expression, he was pressured into silence just by the aura that

Rion was releasing.

Rion bowed his head once again in front of the Crown Prince and went towards Vincent

“Thank you very much for healing me, sir.”

“.....”

Vincent wasn't able to respond to Rion's words of gratitude. He just stood rigid with stiff face.

“I am fine. I am not hurt anywhere. All thanks to Vincent-sama.”

“...Is that so?”

Finally, Vincent was able to speak few words. Due to that, a smile has returned to his face that looked devoid of strength.

“However, this matter needs to be...”

“Kept secret from Ariel, right?”

“Yes.”

“Well if this really reached her, the outcome would be grave.”

“Surely. She would certainly make a face even worse than she did before.”

“She really would, wouldn't she?”

“Well then, let us return. It seems that Vincent-sama has no time to be carefree.”

Saying so, Rion had once again began walking with Vincent following behind. Such a scene, rather than a Master and a Valet, evoked a relationship like that of a close friends.

“Hey, what did you meant by not having the time to be carefree?”

“Thirty-second.”

“Eh?”

“That was your rank on this exam.”

“Thirty-second, huh?”

Hearing his rank from Rion, Vincent’s face broke into a grin. If he was to be asked, ranking thirty-second was better than expected.

“Please sir, do not be delighted with this.”

“But, you know...”

“I also think that those results are fine. However, this shows that if Vincent-sama gives it his all, he is able to learn well.”

“...Well...”

“If you persevere, your ranking is guaranteed to rise. If that happens, then insults like those won’t happen anymore.”

“...Sorry... Going to such lengths for me.”

“No, please do not mind it. I only did so because my head lost its cool.”

Vincent owned the loyalty of Rion. If one insulted his lord he would not let it slide, even if the offending party was a royal.

“However, to think that you would really hurt yourself...”

“Not doing so would be predictable. It was for him to realize the weight of his own words.”

“That’s right but...”

“Besides, when I was really about to die, Vincent-sama saved me even though it meant going against the words of the Crown Prince.”

“Well, of course.”

“That’s why such a rash action was fine.”

“But even so, it’s too reckless. I knew it. Ariel should be told about this. If I inform her, something like this will definitely not happen anymore.”

“That... No, I will gladly do it again. It was for the sake of Vincent-sama after all.”

“However, if Ariel tried to stop it for your sake?”

“.....”

His answer was silence. Rion was not able to find the right answer to his question.

“My bad, it was an unfair question.”

“No, I do not mind.”

Vincent knew the relationship between the two. He understood that it was something he should not support in his position, but as an older brother, he couldn’t help but to get annoyed by it.

With the two of them denying their own feelings and having them bottled up at the edge of their hearts, it was natural for him to get irked by it.

After this day, for a while, Rion would be working on extinguishing a new rumor about Vincent. That rumor said that in order to avoid his own punishment he used his own servant as a scapegoat.

Chapter 13

Event: Excursion (First Half)

Ever since Vincent came to the Academy, rather than improving, his reputation fell continuously. It was due to the rumors that continued to pop up all the time.

Although Rion had begun to act thoroughly to determine their source, he was not able to arrive at any conclusions. The answer he always got was “I’m not sure, I heard it from someone”.

With such rumors being spread to that degree, surely there was someone carrying ill intent behind the whole matter. He thought he had to, one way or another, find the culprit. But he was still unable to do anything and that made him irritated.

He had a suspect although it was just a guess. However, that person was someone hard to deal with. He kept pondering things that he should do to obtain evidence.

“..... on. Rion!”

“...Sir?”

“What are you daydreaming about? I have been asking a question you know?”

“Apologies. What is the matter?...”

“It was about the route of the excursion. Which one do you think is better?”

“Erm...”

In Autumn, the main point of the curriculum was the excursion. Though it was called an excursion, it was far from just going towards a specified place. The students had to determine their route and prepare necessary items beforehand by themselves.

The marching required by that training journey was made extremely easy.

However, demonic beasts that would frequently appear in their path were a real

problem. Although those beast were of a kind that could even be injured by normal animals, for students who had almost no combat experience, they were considerably dangerous opponents.

Of course, to guarantee that emergency situations didn't occur, the Academy made certain precautions. However the existence of the danger and precautions was not conveyed to the students.

It was to boost their desire to fulfill their assigned task of reaching their objective using only their own power.

"Have you consulted others?"

"I already did. They have different opinions so I decided to ask Rion."

"Well then, why not decide by majority vote?"

"Majority deciding on something doesn't necessarily mean that it's the right thing to do. Wasn't you yourself the one who said that?"

"...Indeed."

It was said to comfort Vincent during the time when his opinion was disregarded by others. Those kinds of things Vincent would always remember.

"You have also said that deciding by the majority should be used only when disputes are settled. "

"...Yes. I have also said that."

He said so to defuse Vincent's plans to use the Windhill's influence to suppress opinions opposing him. Although those words were said at a different time with a different meaning, Vincent was properly able to adapt them to the situation at hand, which made Rion slightly surprised.

"Like I said, there's a dispute. To put it down, we want to hear Rion's opinion."

".....In what way are the opinions divided?"

"You weren't listening at all, were you?"

“I apologize, sir. I was thinking of a different matter.”

“I guess there’s no choice. Well then, I’ll explain it again.”

“Understood.”

“There are three routes to the designated point. First would be going around the north flank of the forest. The path led through the mountains, but it was carefully maintained and would be easiest to travel to, even if the distance was the longest.”

Starting with this, Vincent began explaining the problem to Rion carefully.

There were two other routes. The second one would skirt the woods from the south. Although that path was barely maintained, it was much shorter than the northern path.

The last route was to go straight through the forest towards the designated point. Of course, this was the shortest path but the road wasn’t maintained at all. Also, this way carried another problem with it.

The chance of encountering demonic beast was incomparably higher compared to the other two routes.

If one considered the risks alone north, south and lastly the middle, would be the order.

That being the case, the natural solution would be just to choose the safest path, but the conversation didn’t go that way. Although this assignment was called “excursion”, its purpose was to train the students so the dangerous, direct, middle part would be given a higher priority.

Braving the risk and choosing the middle route was the likely outcome.

“Is the opinion divided into three camps?”

“No, into two.”

“North and middle?”

“No. It’s middle and south.”

“...Why is the south route popular?”

“North is too simple.”

“I see.”

“Is the south path not good?”

Vincent knew that judging by Rion’s way of talking, there was a problem with going south. However, he couldn’t figure out why.

“I wouldn’t say that. I have only thought that this option is half-baked. I expected that people’s opinions would gather around both extremes.”

“Half-baked, huh?”

“Shall we go through the reasons behind the choices? What’s the priority for those choosing the middle route?”

“Arriving first.”

“And the south path?”

“...Arriving safely.”

“Those are rather vague. In this exercise isn’t the objective “arriving at the destination without anyone missing” ?”

“Something like that.”

“If the objective is this, then the chosen path should be the northern one. Although it’s a little long, traveling on a carefully maintained path will be less tiresome.”

“...You’re right.”

“The south path not only is the most remote, but to make matters worse the possibility of dropouts happening would appear. I was thinking that there was no reason to choose it.”

“It’s as you say.”

While Rion was speaking he was also paying careful attention to the response of the other students. Their reactions were roughly the same as Vincent's.

There was hardly anyone in this class who wouldn't do as Vincent told. Not because he was well-received, but because of his family's pedigree. Having him force people to do things would lead to dissatisfaction.

For Vincent's reputation, that was something Rion wanted to avoid the most. That was the reason why he told the young lord that it's important to address the dissidents.

"The choices now are either the northern route or going through the middle. Are there any objections?"

Vincent's question raised hardly any response. This was not because of fear but because people agreed.

"That being the case, we're down to setting priorities. Which one should we put higher?"

"...Erm, having me to decide everything is..."

This was also something Rion was mindful of. He thought that if he was to intrude in such matters, it would also be considered borrowing the influence of the aristocratic house. Such a thing would impact the reputation of Vincent who let it happen.

"We're merely going to use it as reference."

"...Well then, If we're talking priorities, what is the main objective of the excursion?"

"Objective of the excursion?"

"Yes."

"...What is it?"

"It might be called excursion, but there's a meaningful reason behind it."

"Oh? It's about the marching drill, huh?"

"Yes. The excursion is just an imitation of military marching drills. That being the case,

what is the minimum objective of a military march?”

“Arriving at the designated point?”

“It is arriving at the designated point within the time-frame specified.”

“Oh, time-frame, huh? In other words... , Northern route, huh?”

Vincent, after giving it a thought managed to reach the correct answer. He was able to understand that arriving in time was more important than being the first to arrive.

“If I was to be the one to decide, then it would be like that. But of course, arriving faster would be better. However, this is your first excursion. Because the danger that the middle route poses is currently unknown, going straight there wouldn’t be the right thing to do in my opinion.”

“I see... You’re right.”

In the end, the whole class was in full agreement with Rion. B-class students decided to bypass the forest from the north.



The very day of the excursion trip. On the carefully maintained road, the B-class students were advancing forward forming a column.

While the B-class chose the northern route, the other classes each chose one of the other two routes respectively. The excursion became neatly separated with one class per route.

“If we manage to estimate the distance and the path properly, we could even advance while running.”

“What are you trying to achieve with running?”

“If we gave it our all, we could arrive at the destination first.”

“That is... Something only Rion can do.”

Rion had the well-trained body to make it possible. Vincent clearly knew that he,

himself, didn't have that.

"If you trained yourself, sir, surely you would be fine as well."

"...Rion's training is too much. I could never go to such absurd lengths."

"If you continued doing it, you'd get used to it eventually."

"Before that, I would surely die."

"Not at all. You would be able to get accustomed to it quickly."

Those who didn't believe Rion's words were not limited to Vincent, but also included the eavesdropping students along with their own servants. They all realized that Rion's common sense was slightly off compared to that of a normal person.

Actually, ever since they departed, Rion ran ahead of the group and returned countless of times. It was obvious he had a considerable endurance since despite all that running he was showing the least signs of tiredness.

As to why Rion kept running ahead like that...

"After crossing the gentle curve ahead, let us take a break. There should be enough space for everyone to sit down."

"Yeah, let's do that."

It was to search for a proper place to take a break. Although compared to the others this route was considerably easier, they were still diligently taking breaks.

It was because, in their class, there were also noble lady students. Some of them had never traveled far on foot.

Although for Rion and Vincent the distance was still easy, for those female students it was a hellish exercise that they had never experienced before.

"So Ariel would be like them as well, huh?"

Vincent whispered to Rion to prevent others from overhearing.

“...I wonder? In my opinion, milady has a considerable stamina.”

“Why do you think so?”

“During the dance lesson she is able to dance for how many hours straight.”

“Oh that, huh? However, she was able to go so far due to her stubbornness, right?”

“Is that the case? Certainly, she does have that kind of mood about her. However, I wonder what is that stubbornness targeted at?”

“You really are...”

Vincent swallowed the phrase “thick-headed”. He knew the reason behind Ariel’s stubbornness.

It was the numerous [You must be tired] remarks made by Rion which caused her to think that he hated keeping her company in dance.

Every time Rion voiced his anxious inquiries, Ariel’s eyes narrowed. Despite that, she seemed to be truly enjoying herself as his dancing partner.

That was the incident that made Vincent fully aware of his younger sister’s complex female heart.

While he was reminiscing, the roomy resting spot had become visible. It was the place that Rion was talking about.

“The third squad will be on watch duty. The female students should take a break in the center of the group.”

Vincent’s instructions flew towards the students. It was his duty as the commanding officer to lead and organize the entire group.

The male students took a position to surround the female students and their handmaidens. The outer circle of the group was made of the students on guard duty that were watching the surroundings carefully.

Although the movements of the group were rather crude, the situation did somewhat resemble an army.

“Let’s proceed with more care from now on.”

“Is it about the demonic beasts?”

“Yes. Because part of the northern path is covered by trees, the probability of demonic beasts appearing rises. That was written in the Academy briefing materials.”

“Is that so? Well then, we should rest a bit longer and then...”

“We should assume a defensive formation with those who can’t fight placed in the middle.”

“Yeah, that’s right.”

If Vincent was the commander, then Rion was the adjutant. Although there was a student given the duty of adjutant, because Rion was performing in that role very well, that student left it to him without a word. For that student with a considerably high pedigree, since he didn’t need to do the job he didn’t want to bother with it. Rion’s existence in that group was favorable to him.

After discussing the future plans, Vincent also took a seat. Although he was not really tired, there was still more than half the distance to go. He was taking the break time seriously.

Although he was about to tell Rion to rest as well, he stopped himself seeing the uneasy face his valet was making.

“Did something happened?”

“...If you look at it, are they not making quite a ruckus? “

“A ruckus? Well, I do not mind at all.”

“Ah no, not the students but... The forest...”

“Forest?”

“...I didn’t mean the sounds...”

Rion whispered to Vincent who was trying to strain his ears. Vincent realizing his

mistake, began focusing his attention on probing the surroundings instead.

“...Certainly, it does seem that way.”

“They may be far but they seem to be considerably agitated.”

“Is that demonic beast that strong?”

“Rather than that, they seem to be more numerous compared to expectations.”

“Is that so. We must take precautions as well, huh?”

“Yes”

The sensation that Rion and Vincent were trying to feel was magic. The beings that Rion sensed through the surroundings spirits were moving vigorously. That effect was called resonance.

There were also other students who were able to sense it and they could be seen making anxious faces.

“Just to be safe, let’s proceed more carefully. No, let’s accurately follow the agreed plan.”

“Yeah. Let’s do that.”

Because the B-class chose the safest route, they didn’t really have good contingencies in their plans. Although it could be said that they were only doing marching drills, no one understood that it could turn into a battlefield and made plans accordingly.

Vincent, having a much stronger sense of responsibility than other people, started to formulate a strategy and began to give instructions. Even without Rion to think for them, the marching plan formulated by the B-class was considerably good as is.

Enough for them to have confidence no matter what would happen.

However, unfortunately, this confidence would immediately crumble. With the situation beyond all expectations, that plan would not be applicable in any way.



“Female students! Gather in the center! Male students as well! Don’t head out on your own! Anyhow, just think of defending yourselves!”

The knight wearing a light armor approached the students while shouting.

The current situation has exceeded the expectation of the students and even the escort knights that secretly followed them along.

“What’s the distance!?”

“They’ll be visible soon! Their headcount... Is roughly in hundreds!”

“Hundreds of them...?”

With hundreds of demonic beasts approaching, although the knights escorting the students have stopped hiding and began to act, their facial expressions were grim.

Although there shouldn’t be any strong demonic beasts within the incoming group, their number was still too high, while the escort only numbered two warriors.

“They’re just small fries, we will manage somehow! Just don’t let them get close to the students!”

“What about having them provide magic support?”

“...Although this situation calls for it, for now, let’s just focus on escaping.”

“You mean, just let the students escape ahead?”

“There’s no choice. We only have two people here.”

This was the same as saying that their protection was insufficient. Hearing these words, the expression of the other knight turned into despair.

“...Why did this happen!? This was why I told them that two is not enough!”

“What are you saying now? Just steel yourself.”

The northern route should've been the safest of all. Compared to the other routes, the number of escorts assigned to it was usually small. However, having only two stationed there was too few.

But there was a reason for this. The students who chose to travel by the middle route belonged to the class attended by the Crown Prince Arnold, Lancelot and Charlotte.

The class that had to be protected the most went with the most dangerous path. Due to that, the majority of knights assigned as escorts concentrated on the middle route. And so the safest route was merely offered a token protection.

But even so, no one saw any problems about it. Normally, the northern route didn't even need to be guarded. However currently, for some reason, numerous demonic beasts were approaching the students.

In number which was unprecedented in light of the past.

"Vincent-sama, let's prepare for retreat."

"Yeah."

The voices of the knights were clearly heard by the students. Every one of them knew that the situation was considerably dangerous.

"We will leave this place immediately. Calm down and separate into groups as planned beforehand."

With Vincent's instructions, the students began to move. The class separated into three large groups. They formed a battle formation in which the female students and their handmaidens were in the center.

When the three large square formations were completed, the first group began to move.

After enough of a gap opened, the next group followed suit. Lastly, the group to which Vincent and Rion belonged set off. This square had no female students nor handmaidens in their ranks. It was the rear guard, in other words, the group tasked with eliminating any demonic beasts that would follow.

"We're retreating!"

Vincent yelled towards the knights.

“Hurry up! They’re coming!”

Numerous shadows began showing up from under the tree cover.

They were demonic beasts with a pitch-black exterior. Although they had a body similar to that of a wolf, their build was considerably larger, they were bigger than the knights themselves. It was not a being that could be injured by normal animals.

“Don’t tell me, there’s hundreds of “that”?”

“Vincent-sama, let’s hurry up!”

“Y-Yeah, Retreat!”

Receiving Vincent’s command, the rear guard followed after the leading group.

“Prioritize moving in formation! I will verify the situation myself!”

Rion yelled towards the students that were looking back from time to time due to check the situation with the demonic beasts. They were doing such a thing is because they feared that the demonic beasts would be catching up.

Rion who was in the last line halted his retreat and turned towards the knights.

The two of them were slaughtering the demonic beasts one after another. However, the numbers of new foes from the forest just continued to grow. It was clear even to Rion that it was impossible for the escorts to hold.

“...Diane.”

Answering Rion’s call, lights gathered around him.

They concentrated on his upwards raised hand. Before long, a large ball of light formed above his palm.

“...Pierce them!!”

As he swung his hand down, the ball of light launched forth and then separated into

numerous water lances. Those flew towards the demonic beasts assaulting the knights.

Dozens of demonic bodies pierced by the projectiles began falling to the ground. But even so, the number of adversaries didn't seem to be diminishing. It would only buy them a little bit more time.

But that much was fine. Because Rion's objective was not really to help the knights but to buy time for Vincent to escape.

Turning his back to the still fighting knights, Rion followed Vincent. Even though he could hear death cries behind him, he didn't spare a moment to look back.

Chapter 14

Event: Excursion (Second Half)

Although Rion only followed well after Vincent's group departed, he was able to catch up to them faster than expected. Even though the situation called for escaping as soon as possible, the group of students halted.

"Is there something wrong?"

"That's..."

The reason the students came to a halt was at the end of Vincent's gaze. One of the girls was sitting on the ground, caressing her foot with a painful facial expression.

"...Is she injured?"

"She seems to have sprained her leg."

"Well then, please heal her immediately."

"The healing magic doesn't work."

Although fractures could be healed, concussions and sprains weren't affected by healing magic. Similarly, things like cold and food poisoning could not be healed either.

Although the reason for this wasn't known, it was still an accepted fact.

"...We must hurry. It is likely, that the demonic beasts have started following us by now."

"That's..."

Rion only shook his head as an answer to Vincent's inquiry. Knowing the meaning of that gesture, Vincent's face turned grim.

"Sir, please make a decision."

“Decision?”

“To save many lives, you must have the resolve to sacrifice a few.”

“...You mean leave the injured behind?”

The thing that Vincent hesitated to say... Was brought into his mouth.

“N-Noo! Please do not leave me behind!”

Hearing Vincent’s words the face of the female student changed colors as she began to panic. Being left behind in a situation like this, meant death. Even she knew that...

“I beg of you! Please don’t leave me behind!”

“But...”

“Please! I will do anything! Please help me!!”

The surrounding students and their servants kept silent while the girl pleaded desperately. There were even a few who turned their faces away. The final decision was now forced onto Vincent.

Being left with such a huge call, he began to break down under the pressure.

“There is also another option.”

In that moment Rion offered another option.

“That being?”

“Please give me the order.”

“The order? What order?”

“To suppress the pursuing demonic beasts.”

“.....”

The sacrifice was changed from the injured female student to Rion. Vincent could not

come to a decision easily.

“Please understand your own position. Vincent-sama is currently the commanding officer of the group.”

“Even so...”

“Even if we leave the injured here, it is still likely that the demonic beasts will still catch up. To shake off the pursuit a rear guard is clearly needed.”

“That is the duty of this platoon.”

“The meaning of being a rear guard is to confine the pursuing demonic beasts by fighting them. This is not the place for Vincent-sama to risk his life in.”

“However!”

“Have you forgotten your duty as the member of a marquess house!?”

It might be called unfair but for Rion to convince Vincent, this argument had to be used. These words could not be refuted by Vincent who was clearly aware of his responsibility as the heir.

“.....”

The silence was the best answer that Vincent came up with.

“The time for Vincent-sama to risk his life is not today but will come in the future. As long as you understand that, please make a decision as the heir of the marquess house.”

“Rion...”

“I am only advising to order me to suppress the demonic beast. This is not synonymous with ordering me to die.”

“...Is that so? You’re right.”

Even Vincent knew that Rion only said that in order to placate his feelings. And because he knew, he chose to reply as follows.

“Well then, your orders sir?”

“Suppress them... Suppress the demonic beasts.”

“Understood.”

“And...”

“...Yes?”

“And make sure to come back alive.”

“Understood. I’ll make it so.”

“I can only lend you this. It should offer you a bit of help.”

Vincent gave him the sword hanging from his waist. Rion accepted it respectfully and immediately turned his back on Vincent.

“Please hurry. They’ll arrive here soon.”

This was not the time to indulge in sentimentality.

“...Yeah. Well then, I’ll be waiting.”

“Yes.”

Vincent’s orders flew immediately afterwards. He instructed others to carry the injured female while dividing the group into two and marching forward. One of the groups was tasked to be the rear guard after Rion.

Although it was irrelevant with Rion remaining in this place, he was still happy with the caution that Vincent exhibited.

After confirming that the students were gone, Rion took off his eye-patch. As if replacing the departed children the presence of the pursuing demonic beasts began to be felt. Rion assumed a combat stance.

He, who have always longed for a desperate battle, had a wide smile on his face.

This was Rion's true self.

If the blue eye, looking calm as water's surface, held Ryou's reason behind it, then the crimson one burned with Flay's flame of hatred. The existence of Rion was a mix of those two dispositions.

Currently, as he was facing battle, Rion's self was more inclined towards belligerent Flay. Being able to use the strength, he managed to acquire, this freely lit a fire in his heart.

"...Sarah."

As if answering Rion's call, bright light gathered around him. As it began to move restlessly in his surroundings Rion could only offer it a bitter smile.

"Don't be so mad. Red eye would stand out too much and I must not appear conspicuous."

Hearing that the light became even more agitated. Like it was not satisfied with the excuse.

"Rejoice. This time, there's no need to hold back. We rarely get this kind of opportunity."

With this, the lights seemed to calm down. It was clearly able to understand Rion's words.

"Look, they've arrived. There's no time for sulking."

Demonic shapes began to appear in Rion's field of vision in steadily increasing numbers. Although they arrived in significant number, instead of charging recklessly they halted their advance at a considerable distance away, as if remembering his magical assault earlier.

"Sarah, you will be the one attacking. Burn the enemies to a cinder. I'll leave the defense to you Diane."

The light in Rion's surroundings begun to take the form of a dragon blazing brightly and in contrast, a lump of transparent, nearly visible, water appeared to stand beside him.

The appearance of the two formed according to Ryou's memories of a fire spirit and water spirit.

"...Well then, let's go."

Drawing the sword that Vincent lent him, Rion advanced.

As if taking that for a signal, the demonic beast had charged immediately.

He swung the sword in an arc in front of him aiming at the demonic beast that leapt at his body. The sword split them in half.

"...There's no resistance... This is not a normal sword."

The sword was cutting the demonic beasts like paper and Rion was surprised by its sharpness.

But it was the sword that the doting marquess gave to his heir, Vincent. There was no way it would be an average blade.

"With this, I can go at them seriously."

While Rion had been cutting the demonic beast with his sword another one flared up to be devoured by fire. Just like that, two had died.

Although the damage was still insignificant compared to the overall number of assailants, Rion felt considerably less resistance.



Vincent who advanced after leaving Rion behind encountered yet another trouble. Compared to the situation they were in when they were escaping, this problem was absurd.

"I can't believe it! How can you do such a despicable thing!?"

The person yelling at him was Maria.

What awaited Vincent, who hurried forward, was not one of the preceding group from class B, but the students of A-class.

The leading pack of his class' three separate detachments was able to arrive at the designated point without even encountering a demonic beast.

Arriving at the designated point, they related the situation to the teachers and asked for reinforcements, but the one who answered their plea were not the teachers nor the knights, but some of the students from the A-class.

Of course, one of those students was Maria. Arnold, Lancelot, and Charlotte who were pulled along her whims came as well. And when those three made a move, others would be obliged to follow.

As a result, with the VIPs moving to rescue the B-class, teachers and knights had no choice but to get involved as well.

Almost all of the people who were at the designated point were now backtracking along the northern path.

Although they expected to meet wounded on their way, before this worry managed to grow further, they met Vincent's group.

Maria who saw Vincent immediately came to rebuke him. This fact was incomprehensible to Vincent. Although he was able to guess why he was being scolded, the fact it was done by a commoner female student defied all his reason.

"To think that you can conveniently sacrifice others to save yourself! And you still call yourself an aristocrat!?"

He couldn't understand the meaning behind her words. After all, it was because that he was an aristocrat that he chose to overrule his personal feelings and withdraw.

"Someone like you has no right to stand above people!"

This as well. It was because he stood above others, that he chose to ignore his personal feelings and made a decision that was for the benefit of the group. It's because he was considering his position that he chose to escape with everyone.

If Vincent wasn't a person of an aristocratic background and shared Rion's life circumstances, he would stay behind and fight with him.

With Vincent not able to comprehend her words, he was stunned into silence and just

stood there receiving her admonishment.

“Say something!”

Staying silent was his form of protest but Maria showed no signs of stopping.

However, Vincent wouldn't let a situation like this continue indefinitely.

“Would you stop already?”

“What did you say!?”

“How long do you even plan to carry on with this!? I don't have the luxury to humour you forever!”

“Such hubris!”

“What hubris!? You do not make any sense!”

“That attitude of yours is so stuck up! Why don't you admit your mistakes for once!?”

Although Maria kept rebuking the no longer silent Vincent, she was looking happy.

“Like I told you, I do not have the time for that!”

“Then, when will you!?”

“Cut it out already! Even at this moment, Rion is fighting there all alone!”

“That's... Eh?”

“I have to ask for reinforcements right away! I have no time to talk to someone like you!”

“It's too late. He has died already.”

“That is something you selfishly assumed! I believe in him! Anyway, I can't stay here and accompany you! I have to hurry up and ask for help! “

Shoving Maria aside, Vincent yelled in the direction of the teachers in the back.

“Well that’s that. Let’s hurry.”

“Yeah, please hurry up.”

“Then, how many demonic beasts were there?”

One of the escort knights inquired Vincent.

“The figure that I saw had exceeded hundreds. But there might be more.”

“Wha!!? What kind of demonic beasts!?”

The knights were clearly shaken by that reply. It seems they did not expect the situation to be this bad.

“They look like pitch black wolves, but their bodies are considerably larger than an adult human.”

“...A Mother Wolf? No way. Mother Wolves were not supposed to appear in this forest.”

“I don’t care about the demonic beasts! Just hurry with the reinforcements!”

However, the teachers and the escort knights didn’t comply with that demand. On the contrary, they pulled away, formed a group and started conversing among themselves.

“What are you doing!? I’m telling you to hurry up with the relief!”

“W-Wait a minute.”

“Like I’d wait!”

“If they were really mother wolves, relief is meaningless.”

“What did you say!?”

“That’s a demonic beast which shouldn’t have appeared in this place, in addition, there’s over a hundred of them. Rather than thinking of rescue, we must figure out why have they appeared here.”

“What will happen to Rion then!?”

“He has already died.”

“...What?”

“It is not something a mere valet could stand against. If they were able to follow up, the escort knights holding them back might have perished as well. These demonic beasts are that strong.”

“No way...”

“Do you understand?”

“...Rion promised that he wouldn’t die.”

“That’s... That kind of promise is meaningless.”

“It was a promise with me! There’s no way Rion would break it!”

“Anyhow! There’s no telling when will these demonic beasts appear again. While we are preparing to intercept them, please return to your assigned place.”

The teacher who said that did not look at Vincent anymore. Although Crown Prince Arnold showed some hesitation as he met the teacher’s gaze, in the end, he nodded in agreement.

Then it was decided that they would move in together.

According to the instructions of the knights, the students would form a group and move out. The only people to remain behind would be the knights assigned as a rear guard and Vincent.

“If you do not retreat as well, you might lose your life.”

“...But Rion is...”

“It would be better to give up. If hundreds of Mother Wolves really were to assault, even we would lose our lives. It is that strong an opponent.”

“What if magic is used?”

“The chance of beating them would increase, but what if the spells fail? If students under our care lost their lives due to that, our lives would be forfeit as well in result.”

“...That’s true.”

Even if they were knights, their position was still that of a retainer of the royal family. If the Crown Prince Arnold and the three other children of marquess families were to be put in harm’s way, the repercussions would be heavy indeed. It’s not unlikely for it to result in a capital punishment.

And... Hearing those words, even Vincent would choose not to remain here any longer. Leaving that place, he turned his back towards the knights and departed.

“...Were you waiting, sir?”

A voice rose behind his back. Even if he didn’t see the speaker, Vincent knew to whom that voice belonged to.

“Rion...”

“If that were to be the case, that wouldn’t be very admirable. In order to avoid danger, you should be escaping as fast as possible.”

Rion’s condition was still unchanged, putting Vincent’s worries in question. That sight calmed Vincent down and made him regain his composure.

“I was just about to do that now. You only stopped me with your call.”

“I see, I apologize sir.”

“What happened to the demonic beasts?”

“I was able to deal with them somehow. Because of the two knights that were escorting us, I did not really have to do anything.”

“...Is that so? Then I must offer my thanks to those two.”

There’s no way that the two knights survived. It was because he knew that they were defeated that Rion decided to stay.

Even knowing that Vincent still went along with Rion's tale.

There were other people here than just them two. Vincent played along because he deduced that the truth was not something Rion wanted the knights to hear.

"Well then, what should we do now?"

"Let's reunite with the other students. I don't know what to do after that as well."

"That's right, isn't it. Well then, shall we proceed?"

"Yeah."

With this Vincent and Rion attempted to leave the place as well but...

"You! Please wait a bit!"

Rion was called by a knight. That was to be expected, though.

"Do you require something?"

"The demonic beasts... What happened to them?"

"Would it be fine to say they escaped? Roughly all of them left in the direction of the forest."

"Roughly? Can you elaborate?"

"Don't the demonic beasts partake in cannibalism? There were several demonic beasts in there that took the remains of their fellows."

"...There were still some remaining, huh?"

If that's the situation, then conducting investigations on the scene would be difficult.

"Their numbers weren't really high and they did not show any sign of attacking again. That is also the reason why I was able to escape safely."

"Is that so..."

However, the danger that their presence possessed still remained in place for the knights. But this was within Rion's expectations. After this, he let himself be carried by the flow of conversation.

"Is it already fine for me to go? I was able to return safely, but I had just made it through a life-or-death experience."

"That's right. I understand how you feel. Proceed to the assembly point."

Judging that the immediate peril disappeared based on Rion's report, the knights themselves had decided to leave the place too.

After all, even if they were knights, they didn't want to die.

After that, because impending nightfall raised a risk of having to travel in the dark, their preparations to leave the forest were postponed till the morning.

With their vigilance heightened, the remaining journey was undertaken with extreme caution. It might be fine to say that because of that they were able to leave the area without any further incidents.

Thus this event reached its conclusion.



Numerous weeks later.

In the headquarters of the knightly order, the Knight Captain was greatly perplexed by the report of his subordinates regarding the incident of demonic beasts appearing during the Excursion. The investigations of that event were now completed and the results were...

"In other words, the students following the central route needlessly fired consecutive spells provoking the surrounding demonic beasts by accident and they attacked the students in the northern route which was closest to them?"

"Yes, sir. That's correct."

"How did you arrive at this conclusion?"

“Well, it was the result of the investigations.”

“Sigh, what kind of investigations? There’s no telling what can provoke demonic beasts, don’t you agree?”

Knight Captain didn’t want to acknowledge a report like this.

“The truth is, sir, there was an underground cave near the central route.”

“Underground cave, you say?”

“Yes. Although, as expected, we couldn’t inspect the whole forest but the cave system is of considerable scope and runs the length of the forest.”

“So what about that cave?”

“It seems Mother Wolves were inhabiting that place. There were other things as well but either way, they were only bunch of demonic beasts that were not supposed to be in the forest.”

“...In other words?”

“Magic destroyed one part of the cavern and rest of the system was under continuous assault. Because of that, the demonic beasts fled that place and their exit path happened to be very close to the northern path.”

“Those accidents conveniently, no, inconveniently came one after another, huh?”

“We were able to confirm the exit paths from the part of the cavern that crumbled within the middle route’s vicinity. Investigating that place further, we were able to confirm the presence of corpses belonging to demonic beasts that you would not normally see in the forest. Of course, Mother Wolves’ as well.”

“...That’s circumstantial evidence.”

Although the result was strongly supported by that circumstantial evidence, the Knight Captain was still not able to accept the report.

“However, that evidence is pretty strong.”

“Well then, do you know who are the students that caused the collapse? Do you want to push the responsibility for this incident onto them?”

He had to be clearer since his subordinate could not understand immediately. The root cause of this incident were the actions of the Crown Prince and marquess houses heirs. The Knight Captain didn't want to be the person to report such a thing.

“That's...”

“Mother Wolves were found inhabiting the depths of the forest. For some unknown reason, those beasts started assaulting the students on the northern path. That is all we found out, understood?”

“...Understood, sir.”

“Well then, this investigation is concluded.”

“There's also one other thing.”

Even though the Knight Captain was about to close the meeting, his subordinate had another thing to say.

“What is it?”

The Knight Captain, who wanted to put an end to this conversation already, was visibly fed up by now.

“When we were investigating the northern route, we were able to confirm that numerous demonic beasts were killed.”

“Is that so... So those two had that much skill in them, huh?”

“Half of those monsters were killed by magic.”

“What?”

“Were those two capable of using magic?”

“...If they were, they wouldn't have remained just knights in the first place.”

“That’s right, isn’t it.”

There were knights able to use magic in their ranks. Not just aristocrats, there were also those blessed with special talents. Those, regardless of their social status, had a considerably high position within the order.

Being able to fight with magic would be able to demonstrate that much of strength.

“If those two weren’t responsible, then who?”

“There is one possibility but it involves circumstantial evidence as well.”

“...Don’t tell me it’s about that infamous failure of an aristocrat?”

“Is it fine to say such a thing?”

“You heard nothing. However, is it really him?”

“No, it is not. The likely one is the valet that serves his House. It seems he was the only person connected to the aristocrats that remained behind to fight.”

“...Is that valet of noble origin?”

“No, he is a commoner.”

“Even though he can use magic, he remains a commoner?”

“Yes. However we suspect it is because he has yet to undergo the coming of age, I was thinking he’s not far off.”

“...Impossible. Just because he is able to use a little bit of magic, there’s no way a commoner’s child can defeat a mother wolf. There must be some kind of mistake.”

After hearing that the valet was still a child, the Captain rejected the report.

There were also those who could use magic among the commoners. However even if they were gifted with talent, without proper training, they wouldn’t be anywhere near decent. Not good enough to be used in battle.

Or so ran the conventional wisdom. The Knight Captain was not someone that would

reject common sense.

“Is it fine to leave it like that?”

“I don’t mind. There’s no way I can report a wild speculation like that.”

“Is that so...”

With this, the truth was buried in the dark. To Rion, it was something both fortunate and unlucky.

After the Excursion incident, another rumor about Vincent spread around. It said that he was the worst kind of person that would leave his valet behind in order to save his own life.

This rumor made Rion question the nature of this world, he started to doubt it as a whole.

Chapter 15

There Is Something Odd About This World

In front of him, numerous books were piled up. Rion requested some free time from Vincent and secluded himself in the library in order to search for something.

He was roughly done by now, but no matter how he searched, he wasn't able to find anything new, only more things that supported his suspicions.

Knowing that, Rion stopped reading new books and put all his strength into thinking deeply instead.

There was something he couldn't understand at all about the gossip that spread after the excursion trip. He couldn't understand why the rumor that said "Vincent abandoned his valet in order to save himself" was so badly received.

Ryou, who was from another world, and even Flay, who only came from the slum area, were devoid of common knowledge. Rion, having enough self-awareness, was able to drill some of it into his head after working as a valet for a while.

He put special focus on studying about valets and their use for their masters and he thought he had a complete understanding of that.

According to that general knowledge of Rion, Vincent's action was proper behavior for an aristocrat and there should've been no room for criticism. Thinking that his knowledge might have been lacking, he secluded himself to read more books on the subject, but in the end, he was only able to arrive at the conclusion that the action they had taken was correct.

If that was the case, then another question resurfaced. There had been numerous times in the past when detestable rumors against Vincent had been circulating. Feeling that the gossip going around had been arbitrary, Rion had set his sights on the possible perpetrators.

The only one with the capability for such actions was Lancelot of the House Aqusmea.

It was strange for Lancelot to see Vincent as his enemy to such an extent. Although that incident during the trial ceremony would be enough to earn some anger, that should not be enough for outright enmity at this point. The connection to Erwin, Vincent's step brother could be a factor, but currently, Rion had no way to investigate that possibility.

Besides, the source of Lancelot's anger towards Vincent was not really important. What was important was that it was impossible for Lancelot who is also a member of a marquess family to spread this particular kind of rumor.

Lancelot and Vincent had received the same education. It was unthinkable that Lancelot could consider the current rumor as something bad. Of course, there was also the possibility that the person himself thought otherwise, but he was not an idiot to the point of expecting other aristocratic lordlings to share the same opinion.

This led to one conclusion. At the very least, the current set of rumors was not spread by Lancelot. Well, who was behind it then? One person easily came to Rion's mind.

Like Lancelot, that person saw Vincent as an enemy for unfathomable reasons. It was Maria Theodore whose attitude towards Vincent was even stranger than Lancelot's.

No matter how one thought about it Maria's willingness to disparage Vincent despite her social status was very odd. So far he brushed off that impertinent attitude despite being able to retaliate if he felt like it. She might have the Crown Prince Arnold's and Lancelot's backing, but her taking action to aggravate the situation, even more, was incomprehensible.

Furthermore, although her behavior was clearly akin to that of a small person borrowing the authority of others, it seemed that the girl herself was thinking that her actions were just even though her accusations had always been unfair.

The option that she was ignorant of the ways of the world was not possible. Even Flay, who had been living in the slums, knew that one must not disobey an aristocrat. There was no way that her parents while sending her to attend the Royal Academy, wouldn't have told her that too.

That being the case, the question of what was wrong with that woman raised dark feelings within Rion's heart.

Not only he and Flay, but even Ryou could confirm that the words of Maria were unfair.

And that her thoughts seemed not to be rooted in this world's mentality but in one from the other world that Ryou had lived in. A female, who had the same line of thought as Ryou, in other words, someone from another world who retained her memories.

Rion couldn't deny that there could be other existences similar to him. There was no need to deny it either.

But if Maria is indeed that kind of existence, then, according to Ryou's knowledge, there was one more possibility. One that Rion wanted to deny at all cost.

His heart began to throb faster at the thought and he attempted to slow it down with numerous deep breaths. This seemed to work and his feelings became calmer.

He decided that rather than losing his mind over maybes, the time has come to take action and confirm what was going on. Rion slowly stood up from his seat.



Maria Theodore. According to the records, she was an outstanding student who ranked second to the Crown Prince. There were also rumors circulating that her magical prowess exceeded Charlotte's, Lancelot's and even Arnold's.

The fact that a commoner surpassed the prince's talent for magic was something that wouldn't usually be accepted. These things were only discussed in the shadows, though, and magical aptitude was not something that could be easily compared. But even so, it was a fact that her talent in magic was not something that you wouldn't expect from a person of her social status.

Only aristocratic bloodlines carried talent. In a world where this was a fact, her existence was something out of place.

Also, she might formally be a commoner, but her background was rather complicated. Originally, she was an orphan that was adopted by the current baronet Theodore as a child. The reason for adoption was her lovely appearance and talent.

The reason why they were able to discover her talent at such a young age seemed to be her black hair and blue eyes which apparently made it obvious.

It seemed that heredity-disregarding black hair on a person was a proof that they would excel in magic. No matter how he investigated, Rion was not able to find out why that was. It looked like a legend. The deep cerulean eyes of hers were also a proof of her affinity to the water attribute. Rion knew that already.

If black hair really indicated that someone was talented in magic, then at the very least this applied to Rion too, but it was not something for him to be happy about. He didn't want to stand out after all. Fortunately, thanks to it not being a widely accepted fact, Rion's surroundings never made a clamor about it.

Anyhow, Maria's talent was able to exceed even the high expectations of her adoptive parents. She displayed a surprising level of intelligence ever since she was a child and probably thanks to the enthusiastic tutelage of her parents, she was able to show her talent in magic from a young age too. Her already lovely appearance improved even more and as a result, little adorable Maria had turned into a beauty.

Then she enrolled in the Royal Academy with the burden of her parent's expectation on her shoulders.

If Maria managed to have her talent displayed and recognized by the public, then this would create an opportunity for a life peerage family to be recognized as hereditary nobles.

When he finished reading the reports about the aristocratic houses made for Vincent's preparations, Rion broke into a deep sigh.

Unfortunately, the contents looked roughly as he expected.

It only reinforced the results of his investigations in the Royal Academy. Being gifted with beauty and talent, Maria, who was like a higher existence, had many admirers but consequently many opponents as well

It's easy to tell that the ones who admire her are the male students and that she was a focus of the intense animosity of the female students. This as well was as he expected.

It seemed she was subjected to frequent chastisements from the female student body as a result of terrible jealousy. However, Maria didn't look disheartened by that. She bravely put up with all the nasty treatment, no matter how bad it got.

She was supported in this by Lancelot and recently by Crown Prince Arnold, who

suddenly closed his distance to her. The two protected Maria in one way or another. That as well was fuelling the vicious circle of female students' jealousy, but for the three of them, it was something irrelevant.

The Salon which was supposed to be exclusively for upper echelons of society now became their place to relax with Charlotte included.

Although they did it so she wouldn't be subjected to harassment, but because she wasn't supposed to be in there, it was having the opposite effect. For them to not realize such a thing, they must have really been engrossed by Maria.

So just who the hell was Maria Theodore? Rion kept thinking about it. He was able to confirm his suspicions but despite that, he tried to completely deny his conclusions.

He refused to acknowledge his suspicions again and again, but the astounding possibility still remained. Moreover, that was the only possibility that wasn't ruled out, so in the end, Rion had to resolve himself and face it.

In the end, his conclusion was— that this world was not an ordinary parallel world. He feared that it was likely, that this world was a game and Maria was its protagonist. And she, aware of that fact, was acting accordingly to her game knowledge.

If that was all, then he wouldn't mind. Even if she conquered the Crown Prince and other young lords, and even if she wanted to indulge herself in such situations he still wouldn't mind. However, there was a reason why Rion could never let it end that way.

In otome games, besides the capture targets, there were also villain characters that would hinder the protagonist. Judging from the situation, it was likely that Vincent was one of those villains, and following the usual conventions, he was probably the stepping stone that would help the protagonist stand out.

And that would make the fiancée of the Crown Prince Arnold, Ariel —- just by thinking about it, flames of hatred started to rise in Rion's heart. Rion would never permit anything that would sadden Ariel.

Even if that something was the protagonist of this world.

“For Rion himself to invite me out. How wonderful!”

“Maria-sama looked genuinely worried about me during the excursion incident. I cannot possibly keep ignoring such a thing forever.”

Rion replied with a smile, while Maria seemed to enjoy herself. He was hiding his true intentions splendidly.

“I think it would be nice if you talked to me in a less reserved manner.”

She replied slightly inclining her head to one side with eyes upturned. Many would probably find such a gesture lovely to behold.

“This is how I normally talk, so it is easier for me.”

“Even if that’s the case. At the very least, the name...”

“Name?”

“Just Maria would be fine.”

“I can’t possibly do such a thing. I am not even a fellow student, merely a valet of House Windhill.”

“However, I am a commoner too.”

“...If the memory does not fail me, you are a member of a baronet family, are you not?”

“T-That’s right. However, a life peer is not really recognized as a noble.”

It was unusual to hear these kinds of things directly from someone like Maria. What was normal was for one at baronet level to want to be somehow recognized as an aristocrat.

“That’s right, however, that is only from the viewpoint of a hereditary noble, for a commoner like me, it is still a house with a peerage.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes.”

“But you know...”

It seems that for Maria, being recognized as coming from a noble house was not very desirable. Although Rion didn't know why would that be, he lodged that information at the corner of his mind. His current objective was to obtain any possible information about Maria.

“...I understand. In that case, would calling you by Maria-san suffice?”

“The -san is... No, that's fine, isn't it! Right, that's fine!”

Maria broke into a dazzling smile. As a result, even Rion, who did not hold favorable opinion towards the female gender, ended up with a startled expression on his face. Every time odd feelings like those gushed up from within his heart, Rion switched personalities. Although he wasn't able to completely change the consciousness, just by switching between Ryou and Flay, he was able to mitigate the effect.

The thing that helped to reduce was the influence of Maria's charm. Although he didn't really know whether there was charming magic or something else occurring, he was able to notice it having some kind of effect on his heart.

Only because he could contain his heart from a third party perspective he was able to prevent it from taking hold.

And Maria's charm, being able to impact Rion with his high resistance to emotional influences, was clearly a frighteningly powerful force.

Although he understood that it might be one of the special powers granted to a protagonist, given its actual power, he wondered if there really was a need to make it so strong.

He allowed himself to indulge in the pointless thought that, perhaps, this game was actually ridiculously boring.

“Well then, where are we going?”

“Eh?”

“Huh?”

“Ah, I apologize. I haven’t really given it a thought.”

“I-I see. You haven’t made any plans prior to inviting me, huh?”

She probably thought that plans for a date should come from the boy. She wasn’t really wrong. It was just that Rion wasn’t thinking of this meeting as a date.

“No, I haven’t. But if we’re at it, shall we go to a shop that I know?”

“A shop that Rion-kun knows? I wonder what kind of shop that is?”

“It’s a shop that serves delicious sweets.”

“Ah, that is nice! I’ve been craving for delicious sweets recently.”

[TL Note : “sweets” here and in the rest of the conversation was written in English in the raw text. ED Note : Chief Editor-san pointed out chapter 9(Rion seducing maids chapter) had Rion talking about desserts, not sweets, so it should not be confused with.]

Maria’s response was perfect. It was the best payoff for the risk Rion took in this conversation. This world didn’t use the word “Sweets” to describe confectionaries. There could be no mistake, even the servants back in the mansion did not know it. Maria, having understood, clearly must have had the knowledge from Ryou’s world.

That suspicion was thus confirmed.

Rion decided to close the distance to Maria he maintained so far.

In reality, he inwardly desired to kill her already without hesitation, but he made himself stop that train of thought. It was because of Ryou’s doubts on whether protagonists were so easy to kill in the first place.

With this world being a game and Maria its protagonist, the whole reality was warped in her favor. It was was a phenomenon that could be called “plot armor”.

In truth, Rion was wondering if the rumors regarding Vincent, were also somehow a result of this.

Anyhow, it was unthinkable to kill the protagonist of a game with plot armor present. It would be good if this was a game with possible bad ends where protagonist dies, but right now Rion was unable to tell what kind of game this was, and even if he was, there was no way for Ryou, who had never played games of this particular genre, to know the details of this particular one.

Well then, how should he proceed?

The first option would be to hinder her conquest, but Maria probably knew everything about the routes, having the knowledge of this game. The other option would be, at the very least, to prevent her from advancing towards the route that was inconvenient for Rion.

That meant preventing her from conquering Crown Prince Arnold, who was the fiancé of Ariel.

If this worked, Ariel would not become a rival character. Although she wouldn't really become totally unrelated, the importance of her role would diminish greatly.

To make this a reality, Rion decided to get closer to Maria.

They went to the shop Rion visited numerous times before. Vincent's purveyor shop. For Vincent, who was very particular about his desserts, only the most delicious ones should be given to him.

"Oh my, welcome to our shop."

The shop assistant, being well acquainted with Rion, approached and greeted him.

"Today I'm here on personal business, there is no need for that kind of greeting."

"Personal business? A-Ah, no... but..."

After seeing Maria behind Rion, the shop assistant was able to deduce his purpose, but for some reason, she was still rather inarticulate.

"Since it's a personal visit, I think you won't mind me coming with another person right?"

To Rion, that attitude behind the shop assistant's inquiries brought a feeling of

discomfort.

“Yes, that is a matter of course, but...”

“Can we take one of the empty seats?”

The shop attendant, still about to ask something, was cut off by Rion. He didn't want her to have any strange speculations about his relationship with Maria.

“...Yes. Please come in.”

Right after that reply, Rion immediately went towards a vacant table. Doing so, in turn, attracted the curiosity of other customers.

With him wearing an eyepatch on his effeminate face, and the beauty of Maria in his company taking people aback, there was no way for the two to be inconspicuous.

Although Rion was already used to the unpleasant stares from the surroundings, the ones he was currently subjected to had a different feel to them and made him feel awkward.

But upon arriving at their table, Rion thought that after coming this far, there was no merit in paying them any mind and he erased the feeling from his consciousness.

“This shop has a really nice mood to it.”

“Does it? Well, beautiful things are beautiful. It's a high-class shop on its own after all.”

“Really?”

“Contrary to expectations, due to my position I only know these kinds of shops. After all, I don't have to shop for my personal needs.”

“Don't tell me you do not even get breaks?”

“There are no fixed break periods. However, when I really need one, it is usually granted, so I find that arrangement sufficient.”

“Is that so? Rion-kun is an orphan, right?”

“...Who did you hear that from?”

“Lancelot.”

“Who did Lancelot-sama hear it from?”

“That’s... Are you angry?”

“Do excuse me, Vincent-sama was the only one who was supposed to know of my origins, so I simply wondered how did this information travel around...”

“I see. It seems Lancelot had heard it from Erwin-kun.”

“Oh, so that was the case. Is Maria-san acquainted with Erwin-sama?”

“I met him once. Lancelot organized a tea party at his place and I met him there.”

“So that’s how it was.”

It was truly easier to gather information from Maria. Was she not aware of the current turmoil inside the House Windhill, or perhaps did she know, but simply didn’t care enough to hide the relevant information?

The graveness of this revelation depended on which of the two was true. If it was the latter, then that would be a huge problem for Vincent.

“I have also heard about other things.”

“Would you please elaborate?”

“Were you not subjected to a very cruel treatment?”

“...To this extent?”

If it was just her knowing about Rion being an orphan, then it was fine. But if she even knew about the heterochromatic eyes, then that would be a problem. If it was discovered that his valet carries heterochromia, more malicious rumors would circulate about Vincent.

“That’s right. I heard you were even being called a pet. Is that not cruel? For them to

treat a human being as a pet.”

“Eh, so you meant that?”

Why was a matter from so long ago brought up by Maria? It was so unexpected that Rion replied inadvertently.

“Eh?”

“Ah, apologies. It’s just that it never really bothered me. In result of all this, my life was spared after all.”

“That’s just them tricking you. All people have the fundamental right to live.”

“Fundamental right?”

“That’s correct. Even Rion-kun has it. Having the right to live is something obvious. Because of that, I think that demanding a favor for such a thing is unfair.”

“...I see.”

As expected, Maria’s argument was really incomprehensible to Rion. Even Ryou felt like that. Though he knew what she meant, he had no idea why such an issue was brought up by her here.

“I... Want to be Rion-kun’s strength. I don’t know what I can do alone, but if we can gather everyone’s power, I’m sure it would amount to something.”

Maria said this, while intently staring into his eyes with a serious face. Before he knew it, her hands were already clasping his.

Her unrestrainedly assertive approach was bewildering to him.

“Erm... For the time being, shall we place an order?”

“...Ah, w-we should, shouldn’t we?”

Not knowing how to react, Rion decided to change the topic. Unfortunately for him, it was already too late.

The shop attendant taking Rion's order looked very worried as she interrupted their conversation.

"Uhm... , I'm sorry, but she seems to be angry..."

"Angry?"

"I think that person seems to be quite angry..."

"What are you talking about?"

"Like I said..."

Moving his line of sight towards the place the shop attendant was being conscious of, he saw...

"...No way."

The figure of Ariel, with her arms trembling, standing there with a fearsome smile on her face.

Chapter 16

The Resolve to Defy the World

“Please, excuse me for a bit!”

After yelling to Maria in panic, Rion hurriedly left his seat and headed to Ariel’s table. Eyes of his lady only kept staring at him.

“Uhm..... , You have come to visit the Academy milady? “

Although he had nothing to be guilty of, being subjected to Ariel’s scowl always made Rion very nervous.

“Yes. Someone left the mansion, so my days have turned tedious. Perhaps, am I a... Hindrance?”

“How could that ever be...”

“First, sit down.”

“I am just a valet, I would not presume to sit with milady.”

“Sit with me? I only told you to sit down.”

“...Ah, so you did.”

Rion recognized that his intuition became dull due to not confronting Ariel’s fury in a long time. When she demanded he sit down, she did not actually refer to the chair but to the floor.

He immediately assumed a seiza form on the ground in front of Ariel.

“Closer.”

“At once, milady.”

After he moved closer, as ordered, Ariel reached with her hands and pinched Rion's cheeks. With this incident happening in public view, the maids attending Ariel thought of stopping her, but they immediately stiffened under her intense gaze.

"...Your eyepatch is in the way."

"Milady, taking it off here..."

"...Can't be helped I guess. So be it, there are more pressing matters than looking at your eyes."

"More pressing?"

"You seem to be in need of chastisement."

As she said so, both of Rion's cheeks were clapped in her hands. This treatment was also something he wasn't subjected to for a long time now.

"So enlighten me, what are you doing in this place?"

"W-we were only, discussing some matters, milady."

"Who is that woman?"

"S-She is a student from the Academy attending the same year as Vincent-sama."

While his cheeks were being struck, Rion was interrogated by Ariel in a strict tone. However, her eyes were already smiling. She was enjoying his presence after such a long time.

"What on earth might you be discussing with that woman, I wonder?"

"I... For now, I cannot..."

"...Ah, keeping secrets from me again?"

Ariel's eyes twitched visibly. It was the proof that she was really angry now.

"N-No, milady, you're mistaken! It just can't be revealed here... It's... Well, it's the usual..."

“...Oh?... The usual?”

Though she was still far from being satisfied, Ariel ran out of things to complain about.

After all, she was the one who told Rion to do something about Vincent’s situation and because of that, she wasn’t really in a position to complain about his activities.

“Yes, milady.”

“...I see, I guess it can’t be helped then.”

After this, according to Rion’s experience, this matter would be settled relatively quickly, but contrary to what he expected, the person who always makes things complicated cut into the conversation.

“You, what are you doing to Rion-kun?”

And that was none other than Maria. As with Vincent, Maria is hostile towards Ariel from the start.

“How about introducing yourself before interfering? Or perhaps, do you even lack such basic manners?”

Ariel showed no signs of being perturbed. In this, she was very different from her brother Vincent.

“I...”

“Spare me. After all, I am not really interested in who you are.”

“What did you say!?”

“Would you please leave us? I am currently in conversation with Rion here.”

Ariel said so while showing a smile on her face. It was conduct becoming of a noble lady– or rather, a dignified conduct, one would not expect from a child.

“...D-Doing that to Rion-kun...”

Maria was able to stammer some words, despite clearly being pressured by Ariel’s aura.

“Ah?”

“Stop being cruel to him.”

“...Cruel? What might you be talking about? When did I ever do something cruel to Rion?”

“Right now, In the public eye, you are making him perform a seiza on the ground.”

“And what is wrong with that?”

“What did you say?”

“Sometimes, I also make him kneel. Others too, it’s not like I’m singling him out.”

“This way of flouting your social status is the problem!”

Maria shouted after somehow regaining her vigor, but...

“...I truly cannot understand you. Flouting my social status? This?”

Ariel inquired with a puzzled look on her face.

“An aristocrat like you will never understand!”

“Oh dear, it seems I’m not the only one failing at comprehension. In the end, you also fail to grasp the situation.”

It wasn’t that Ariel suddenly understood what Maria was just saying, but she was certain that the attitude she witnessed was a very serious misconduct.

“What exactly do I not understand!?”

“Let me help you a bit. Who do you think you are talking to?”

“...Ariel-san of House Windhill.”

“Bravo. So you know who I am, yet behave like this regardless. What House do you happen to belong to?”

“...It’s House Theodore.”

With Ariel not rising to her provocations and continuing to answer in a calm demeanor, Maria began to feel uneasy. She immediately realized that things weren’t proceeding into her desired direction.

“Theodore... Theodore... Wasn’t there a baronet of that name...”

Ariel could recall all Houses with a peerage. After all, that was knowledge expected of a noble lady. But she, mastering it at her current age even including the baronets, was splendid at this.

“That’s probably the one you’re thinking of, Theodore.”

“Splendid. I understand you’re a commoner then?”

“And, what is wrong with that?”

“You’re a commoner displaying gross impertinence in front of an aristocrat. Are you not aware that’s a punishable crime?”

“I will not yield to such threats!”

“I care little for your thoughts on this matter. This is the law. I am invoking the law. I expect your conduct to be punished.”

“Punished?”

“There is a class system in this kingdom. This system is protected by law. Are you not even aware of that?”

“...It”

–Was unknown to her. But even if she did know, her attitude wouldn’t change. She thought that the things she did were permitted by default due to her being a protagonist.

“So you actually didn’t know. After all, in front of the law ignorance excuses no one.”

“...What wrong did I even commit?”

But even so, she was not able to act tough in front of Ariel. Ariel had the aura of a person that would not permit such a thing.

“That is a question for the person judging my claim. Punishment adequate to your misdeeds will be also in his remit.”

“.....”

Ariel completely overwhelmed Maria. Whether that was due to her being the antagonist in this game was unknown to Rion. The only thing he understood was that the two girls, who should never be allowed to meet together, encountered each other in such a way and splendidly opened hostilities.

Keeping in mind that it could be the game plot correction at work, made him grow more anxious.

Ariel turned her sight to a silent Rion again and didn't concern himself with Maria anymore.

“Well then, when will we meet next?”

“...I would expect that to happen during New Year's break, milady.”

Rion wondered why she asked that when he knew that Ariel was not in a habit of asking such obvious questions.

“Oh? Are you never coming to this place again?”

“I... Had no more plans to do so?”

“In that case next week at the same time will be perfect.”

“Milady?”

“You clearly have free time, you shall spend it for my sake. Won't that be just splendid?”

“Ah... But...”

“Just. Splendid.”

“...As you say, milady.”

Rion wouldn't be able to defy something that was so strongly demanded by Ariel. To be exact, he didn't even feel like defying. Although, this particular request would be at the expense of his sleeping time.

“Well then, I shall excuse myself for today. Rion, let us meet again next week.”

“With greatest pleasure, Ariel-sama.”

Hearing the words of Ariel, her maids hurriedly run out off the shop to call the carriage that was parked nearby.

Ariel, being aware of that, spent some time in conversation with the shop owner praising the desserts before unhurriedly exiting the shop.

Rion could only see off her back.

“Rion-kun, if you are ever subjected to cruelty again, you can talk to me about it anytime.”

“I understand...”

“After all, our circumstances are similar. I think, I somehow understand how you feel.”

“...That's right.”

Rion didn't notice yet that the protagonist, Maria, already recognized him as a capture target. Maria's complaints about Rion's treatment were an attempt by her to sway Rion by a display of sympathy.

That in itself was all that Rion could have hoped for, but the final outcome, unfortunately, did not follow his plan.



Rion's main miscalculation was in thinking that Maria was aiming for a specific route while in reality, she was aiming for a reverse harem situation.

She set her sights on multiple targets and never limited herself to just one.

One of the choices he thought he had was to let himself be the preferred target, and have Maria abandon the 'Crown Prince Arnold route', but that proved to be a non-starter.

Now, in complete contrast to what he wanted, Rion was just added as one of her many objectives. Still, even though he was doing that himself now that the opponent tried it on him, the feeling of being manipulated was unpleasant.

Nonetheless, for the sake of his intelligence gathering, being closer to target was convenient, so he decided to keep in close contact with Maria. Although this course of action brought great discomfort to him, that much was still acceptable.

Anyhow, Maria was getting proactive, boldly approaching Rion so much that it made Ryou wonder whether this game was possibly an eroge. However, according to Rion's investigation, that was not the case.

At the very least, according to his information, her relationship with Lancelot, who approached her the most, was platonic. That left him to wonder again why did she behave in the way she did, but before long that also became clear.

There were capture targets that Maria knew how to trigger flags for and ones she didn't. Rion belonged to the latter category.

That was why she tried so many various kinds of approaches.

Many times it was showing her sympathy towards Rion's past and current life circumstances. On other occasions, she would try to show how wonderful it was to live freely or get him to talk about his dreams. There were also times when she even invited Rion for a heart-to-heart talk about his hardships.

"Succeeding by any means necessary", this expression fit her actions perfectly.

By encountering the conquest targets at the right time and place, she would trigger an event and set the flags that would help deepen her relationship with them. Just like in the game.

Rion was able to find out one more thing relating to this.

Maria aimed not only for the capture targets of the game she played, but she also set her sights on the people she met in this world.

Rion found that really greedy and grew to hate Maria even more, but that was three days ago.

Now he still hated her, but his feelings were no longer limited to just that and turned rather complex.

The reason for that lied in the fruits of his hard work in investigating her.

Patiently putting up with Maria brought him a success. He obtained information that would make the aims behind him approaching Maria nearly realized.

There was a notebook that Maria stealthily glanced into at times. In that notebook, all the information about the game that Maria knew was written. She was always consulting that before making a move.

How was he able to find out about that? By peeking, obviously.

She usually kept it close to her chest, but Rion, by exploiting a small window of opportunity, was able to look at its contents. Because there was little time, he was not able to read it all, but he was able to roughly understand the contents.

There were descriptions of capture targets' personalities along with notes on how to get acquainted with them and how to raise their flags. There were also names other than the capture targets. These included Ariel and Vincent.

Although these entries were mostly things that Rion could never get himself to agree with, it was pointless to worry about that. He calmed himself by thinking it was probably just the information from the game.

But what really caught the attention of Rion was the last page. The things written there had no relation whatsoever to the capture targets but involved an event that was supposed to happen once the story progressed forward past the capturing stage.

This was what made Rion's feelings regarding Maria complicated.

His biggest problem with Maria was Ariel's denunciation event. He established that even amongst all the rival characters, Ariel ranked as the most important. There was little detail about the event written but, it looked like that all the censure heaped by Ariel at the protagonist would be revealed and condemned by the public. It was highly likely to affect her engagement with Crown Prince Arnold.

In other words, the event that Rion had to prevent at all cost.

Even by using his last resort solution— Well, that was how things should be, but he was still hesitating. It was due to an event that would follow up shortly after.

[The Devil Extermination Event].

An event where Maria, along with people she captured in the Academy would fight against a devil that would attack the royal castle. It seemed that this was the goal of the game.

If she and her comrades would be able to fend off the attack, the game would be beaten successfully. Failing would also result in a game over, but since all the characters perish and the kingdom falls, that ending is bad.

The reason why Maria flips her skirt at anyone was for the sake of gathering as many allies as possible and succeeding during this event. Now, Rion understood that much.

It was truly a simple, uninteresting and rather worthless game that neither he or Ryou would ever consider playing– but he couldn't just opt out.

After all, the country that was going to fall was the one he was currently living in.

If he killed Maria, the story might end even before reaching the attack of the devil. The kingdom would fall apart. Well then, should he let the story run its course to Ariel's future disaster? That wasn't something he could do either.

If he was able to fight off the devil after killing Maria, then everything would be fine. He was considering the possibility that killing her might result in the game world breaking free from the plot rails, but that was by no means guaranteed.

Rion faced a dilemma that he had no solution for.

“...Ouch.”

Feeling pain in his cheek, Rion's consciousness was brought back down to earth.

Ariel's green eyes were glaring at him. He suddenly remembered that he was in the middle of a tea party that she regularly organized every week.

“Are you paying attention now?”

“Do excuse me, milady, I was lost in thought.”

“Which was rather rude of you. You are not yourself recently, what plagues your thoughts so much?”

“...”

“Cat got your tongue?”

Ariel, in general, was strangely worried about him hiding things. Just like right now. In addition, the sharpness of her glare has increased.

“No, milady...”

“Then stop hesitating and say your mind.”

“What does milady think of his majesty, the Crown Prince?”

“Eh?”

“Forgive me please, I shouldn’t have.”

“...So why?... What makes you ask that??”

“It’s because...”

“Because?”

“In my heart, I am uneasy with the concept of a marriage arranged at birth. I understand such a thing is normal in the world of high nobles and yet... Could I hear milady’s thoughts on the matter?”

“...To ask such an odd question... Why?”

She asked again, however, this time, while saying that, Ariel’s face was full of melancholy. Rion, on the other hand, turned all gloomy thinking that he just asked something that he should’ve never had.

“...This is just the way things are, I suppose...”

But even despite the mood, Ariel still answered Rion’s question.

“Is it due to aristocrats’ sense of duty?”

“Does that really even need to be said?”

“I beg your forgiveness again.”

“Stop apologizing each and every time, it’s tedious. Like you said, it is a norm for a young lady to marry a stranger, and by chance, for me, that stranger is his majesty Arnold.”

“Does that future make Ariel-sama happy?”

“.....”

“...This was too presumptuous of me, please pretend you heard nothing.”

Ariel just glared at Rion without saying anything. He somehow managed to both understand and misunderstands her feelings at the same time.

She was not angry about being asked this question. It was the fact that it was Rion who asked that made her infuriated. And because she couldn’t even vent that frustration to him, she had no choice but to stay silent.

“May I ask another strange question?”

Not being able to bear with the awkward atmosphere any longer, Rion decided to change the subject.

“What is it this time?”

“Has milady ever heard about the devil?”

“Devil? The one from the nursery tales?”

“Nursery tales?”

“...If you’re not asking about that, then what on earth are referring to?”

“I stumbled upon a weird rumor the other day. It seemed to be oddly credible, so to hear that it’s just a nursery tale makes me quite surprised.”

“Was it about a revival of the devil that would bring this world to ruin?”

“Yes. That was exactly it.”

“Do you really believe in things like that?”

“It seemed somewhat compelling and was supposed to happen in the near future...”

“I see... The ending of the fables I heard was rather incoherent, only good for scaring little children.”

“Why was that?”

““If you’re really bad, the devil will come and take you” – Truly something only kids would take seriously.”

“I see.”

That really was a common theme for the nursery tales. However, Rion knew that there was a good chance that this particular one would come true.

“If the devil really came, what would Rion do?”

This time, it was Ariel’s turn to ask Rion a question.

“Escape of course.”

“...Idiot.”

“Eh?”

It looked like Rion made Ariel angry again.

“Planning to run and leave me behind?”

“Ah! In that scenario, I would, of course, give it my all fighting for milady...”

“There’s no need to try protecting me at all cost.”

“I respectfully disagree. Protecting you, milady, is the main reason I joined house Windhill. I would not have it any other way...”

“...Silly fool.”

This time, Rion’s words caused a smile to bloom on Ariel’s face. That smile came from the depths of her heart, a side of her she seldom revealed. Rion was completely captivated by it.

The reason behind the [I will protect Ariel] vow that Rion made a core of himself changed into being only half motivated by responsibility.

Now, the other half came from the fervent desire to protect her smile.

“Rion...”

With the smile he wanted to protect disappearing, Ariel’s face had turned serious once more.

“...Milady?”

“I... Will become the Queen.”

“...So you will, milady.”

That was synonymous to being married to Crown Prince Arnold.

“When that time comes, I shall abandon my personal feelings and devote my very being to this country.”

“That sounds right.”

“That’s why... At the very least, I do not wish to kill these feelings in me before that fateful day...”

“I don’t think, milady, that anyone would begrudge you that.”

Ariel's feelings were Rion's top priority no matter what.

"That selfishness of mine will be source of many troubles for you, you know..."

"I pledged to protect Ariel-sama, I would never be deterred by just that."

"Really?"

"Yes. And that resolve will not change, whether it be now or in the future."

"Thank you."

"...It's the least I can do."

Rion was astonished by her words. It was the first time that Ariel conveyed words of gratitude to him.

"Why, exactly, are you startled now?"

Seeing Rion's startled expression, Ariel's aura returned to normal.

"No reason, milady. Would you please allow me to say one last thing?"

"...Go ahead."

"No matter what I do from now on. No matter how it looks to the surroundings. Will you please remember and have faith that all of it is for your sake?"

"And where did that come from?"

"Can you please believe that even with no reason offered?"

"...Really now. Fine, so be it. Since it can't be helped, no matter what happens from now on I will believe in you."

"I am extremely grateful for that."

What Rion, having resolved himself to do anything it takes, feared the most was losing Ariel's trust. Even though he tried to prepare himself for that eventuality, he couldn't help but plead for her faith nonetheless.

It was because if he didn't, he was not confident that he could gather enough resolve.

His last resort was to kill Maria. But because doing so looked impossible, he understood that by attempting that he would certainly lose his life as a consequence.

But that was what it took to defy the world itself.

Chapter 17

Action, Action, Action

After resolving himself to a future course of action, Rion's everyday life had become even busier as the number of things that he had to do expanded noticeably.

First of them was to put more effort into his self-training. With his last resort being the assassination of Maria, it was necessary for him to have the strength to make it a reality.

After all, Maria's talent in magic was something recognized not only by the Academy alone. On top of that, her talent being something that surpassed anyone in the Academy was also a recognized fact. Furthermore, she seemed to have an aptitude for swordsmanship too. Although her fencing skills couldn't be said to be as good as her magic, they were still enough to place her name in the Academy's top 10.

She was the protagonist that would fight the devil. Not only she was enjoying the blessings of being the main character, Rion was able to understand that she was strictly training herself as well.

He might possibly have to face that Maria. He understood that it was impossible to defeat her with his current meager prowess. And though it was still doubtful whether he would be able to pull it off after going to such lengths in training himself, it was not like he could just watch and do nothing.

So now, his weekday's training was not limited to the period before dawn but also expanded to the time when people were waking up. He also started to train himself during the time people went to sleep and stayed up quite late. Some of his sleeping time was now shaved off by the new training regimen.

Furthermore, his practice sessions were not limited to weekdays anymore.

He even did them early in the morning during weekends. He would go to a place where demonic beasts appear and accumulate combat experience. Was this recklessness or would this training method, with enough effort, make him even stronger? Rion was not entirely sure.

However, the time remaining to take action was not even a year. So rather than worrying, he would rather act. And more training was the first thing that came to his mind.

While that continued he has also spent his time on other various projects.

In the Academy, his main priority was expanding his personal network of connections. He targeted both the noble female students that were jealous about Maria's close relations with big Houses and the prince and the commoner ones that were jealous that she got to mingle with aristocracy despite being one of them.

Although he was not aiming for something like an Anti-Maria alliance, he wanted to make an information network where he could get ahold of any rumors about her that would be advantageous for him to know and have the ability to contradict any gossip damaging Ariel or Vincent.

This was considerably hard to create. It was not like anyone who bore animosity towards Maria would do, on the contrary, those whose hate for her was so strong that they would act on it openly had to be rejected.

Any action, likely a rather reckless one, taken by them that was favorable to Ariel was certain to be linked to Ariel and impact her reputation. It was something to be avoided at all cost to prevent the denunciation event from happening.

Rion believed in Ariel and he had faith that she would never move to torment Maria, like the rival character in the game, did. He was certain that the event was based on false charges.

Furthermore, Rion was also preparing another trick.

This time, it was a plan that did not involve the Royal Academy but the dark side of Rion, the Flay Syndicate in the slums.

"Who sponsored the contract?"

"It was possible to follow the representative. It was viscount House Lyle."

Ain was the person answering Rion's questions. In Rion's absence, he was managing the syndicate operations in the slums.

“Anyone in particular?”

“Hard to say, boss. The contact works for the House’s majordomo, but that doesn’t say much. The contract though seems to favor one person in particular...”

“Lady of the House does not forgive, eh? Buying death for all lovers of her husband...”

“Yeah.”

“Viscount House Lyle... Something to keep in mind...”

“Boss, is it good to spy on employers like that?”

“It’s fine if we’re not exposed, so just don’t go too far.”

“Do we choose to stop then?”

“No. Information is power. Knowledge of circumstances around the contract can be our shield if we just accept the jobs blind one day we’ll end up getting framed into something that will destroy the group.”

“...True that.”

Well, this was also an excuse. For him, it would really be a trump card, but one to use not for the sake of the syndicate, but when something happens to Ariel.

That event would probably escalate into a situation where not just the students would get involved. Rion knew that the fate of the rival characters in such games tended to end up like that. With that being the case, even if it was just a little bit, he had to gather strength in order to save Ariel if that was to happen. It didn’t matter if he did that by blackmail.

The tricks that Rion was stuffing up his sleeves were not limited to this.

“How’s the other business?”

“Too early to say. We probably got a mark we can exploit...”

“Aha... And how’s the search for a powerful backer?”

“We’ve got some grunts from provost, useful in a way, but worthless for that purpose.”

“Yeah, even a captain wouldn’t be enough.”

An aristocrat with influence comparable to the marquess houses. That was the kind of connection Rion desired. Someone, who in exchange for bribes and favors would save them when the time came.

“To be honest, boss, it’s hard.”

“Yeah? Why?”

“The potential backers look for profit, but there’s hardly any to be made in here. Unless you’re in urgent need of making someone vanish.”

“So we’re just not attractive enough?”

“For them, we’re just a bunch of thugs from the slums.”

“Then we need to expand, we gotta turn into something they can’t ignore.”

“...Seriously.”

And just like that Rion formulated another massive goal. For petty criminals like Ain, who lived their whole life in the slums, his ambitions were too huge.

But although he, and the other henchmen, thought so, they also found it fun to have a life goal like that.

“How much longer until we’re in full control of the slum?”

“Not long, boss.”

“Huh?”

“I was going to mention that later. See, the majority of Gordon’s group wants to join us now. “

“...Why?”

“Cause the standard of life in our zone is better and they wanna have some of that too.”

“Is that a ploy to take over from inside?”

“I thought about it, but... Nah, not possible.”

“Why’s that?”

“If they remove you, boss, won’t everything just go back to shit? After all, you’re why the changes happened.”

“...Too much ass kissing.”

“Heh, a pure fact this. We all just done as we’ve been told. If boss, wasn’t boss, life here would never get so good.”

“...Alright, enough. You make me feel sick with all that sweetness.”

If Ain was to be asked, this side of Rion was one of his charms. Going from being terribly scary when angered to showing his subordinates demeanor not befitting his age.

Not only was he reliable, Rion was also someone who would somehow want to do something for the people around him.

Without realizing it himself, Rion had garnered a lot of popularity within his subordinates and the dwellers of the slum.

The reason why the other influential organizations there decided to join their syndicate was thanks to that reputation. People saw him not just a mere child, but possibly the slum’s ray of hope.

“So how to proceed?”

“If you feel there are no problems, then go ahead. We’ll be able to pull off larger things with everyone gathered under our lead.”

“Will do, boss. I’ll pass the news.”

“Until I come back, all the problems with this are on your head. Just make that lot understand that there’ll be no changes for the better before we get a grip on their zones.”

“Understood. Will do that. But I’ll have to spend some time there. They need to get familiar with our faces.”

“Perfect. All yours then.”

Ain knew that Rion would not just wait for an opportunity but after hearing the reports on the state of their new acquisitions, he would think about what they should do for the people living there until the day he came back.

He was certain that once they were aware of that side of Rion, any malcontents would vanish and all of them would soon follow Rion from the depths of their heart.

After all, to Ain and his folks, Rion was that kind of existence.



Although Rion’s days turned busy, it was not as if he was disregarding his job as a valet to Vincent. He was merely using the free time between the tasks to undertake various projects.

But even if that was the case...

“...Rion, Why don’t you go and rest a bit?”

Rion, who was accompanying Vincent in his studies, was frantically fighting drowsiness, something that was never a problem before and he found it hard to believe he was struggling with this now.

“...My apologies, sir, where have we stopped last time?”

“Don’t change the subject, please. My study sessions are progressing favorably, so you don’t need to be here. Go and rest.”

“Sir, that would be absolutely unacceptable.”

Rion had no inclination to accept Vincent’s proposal. He felt that he became who he

was exactly because he was Vincent's valet.

"I kept my counsel thus far to let you act as you wished, but I can stay silent no longer. Working at the cost of your health will not be tolerated, do you understand that?"

"...Crystal clear, sir."

"I know and I can see that you cherish the well-being of me and my sister, but you need to accept you are important to us as well. Please act with that in mind. "

"Vincent-sama..."

"Never forget that, Rion."

"I shall etch that in my heart."

If Rion was to be asked, Vincent was truly a gentle lord. Although he tended to be selfish at times, but that was only pointed at the foolish servants who offended him.

And though he had been really self-centered before, now that side of him disappeared completely.

As he noticed Rion's serious approach to receiving and following up on his selfish requests, Vincent became happy and his selfishness disappeared because he didn't want to put his valet through such hardships any longer.

Rion wasn't aware of that. For him, rather than a selfish lord, Vincent was always a considerate person.

But because the people in Vincent's surroundings were not trying to properly understand Vincent as Rion did, their assessment about him never changed.

Rion couldn't stand that.

And now the same thing was happening in the Academy. Students' and staff's evaluation of Vincent was not improving either. Even though the malicious rumors about him spread very easily, no one was talking about how Vincent was now.

Rion wanted to do something about that.

“Rion?”

“Sir?”

“Honestly, just go to bed already. You’re barely keeping awake.”

“That’s not true, sir, I was just pondering on a certain problem.”

“...That’s enough excuses. Rest. That’s an order.”

“...As you command.”

Since this time Vincent’s words were accompanied by an order, Rion was compelled to follow. All the more, since this command was a result of Vincent’s kindness.

Standing up from his seat, Rion headed towards the room next door that was his to use.

While leaving he heard Vincent say from behind.

“Don’t try to face all your troubles alone. I don’t mind sharing some of the burdens you carry.”

“...I thank you for kind words, sir.”

Vincent’s gentleness nearly made Rion involuntarily shed tears. But even so, he had no plans to stop taking it all upon himself.

It was also likely that Vincent wouldn’t believe the astounding truth that this was a world from a game. And even if he did, Rion didn’t expect any action that Vincent would take to head into a good direction.

Vincent was one of the characters in the game. Just like in the case of the protagonist where an unknown force compelled events to twist in her favor, Rion thought that other characters were prisoners of similar influences.

He thought that only irregular existences, not included in the game, were capable of taking actions that would alter the plot.

He had no way to determine if that idea was correct, but since he was uncertain, he

felt he had no choice but to take the course of action that he thought was right.

This was tremendously harsh on his mental health. Because this was a game world, altering the course of the story meant changing the world itself. It was outrageous for someone of his station to attempt that.

And there was also the nagging doubt of whether changing the course of the story was even possible in the first place? Facing this question as he tried to attempt that very thing, Rion was being overwhelmed by pressure.

But when talking about Rion, one had to remember that he could probably divide the strain within himself and he didn't fear something like dying. It was fine to say that he didn't even feel like his life was worth anything.

Part of the pressure he was feeling came from the worry about how it would affect his relationship with Ariel in the future.

He was strained by the thought of how badly would their life be impacted if he ever failed while carrying their future on his shoulders.

Rion, going to his room to rest as ordered, was flooded by dark thoughts as those.



While Rion was struggling with his worries, this world's protagonist also had various things on her mind.

Although compared to Rion's, Maria's problems seemed rather less significant.

"Sigh, I'm not feeling enough reaction, did I overdo it?"

She was speaking to herself as she read her notebook. The page she had it opened on had the names of her capture targets written. Not all the possible ones from the game but the ones she designated for herself in this world.

Below each of them, she wrote their lineage, personality, and abilities. At the very bottom of each entry, she listed what she thought was the key to capturing them. The records for the characters of the game had relevant information from the game itself while the non-game characters information was just her wild guesses.

(I need to reduce by half... No, since new students come soon, I need to pick a third of the people from the list)

The number of names written in her notebook was roughly around twenty. With so many male students approaching her, there was no way for her to get no response from that guy.

(So who should I keep... Arnold and Lancelot are a must. Marcus is alright, so is Julius... And now that I think about it, no one else really matters, huh?)

The names she listed were all characters in the game. Which meant that the ones she successfully set a flag with were mostly game characters. To Maria, this fact was quite shocking.

(Hmph... Even though I'm so beautiful.)

Maria honestly thought that her outward appearance in this world was rather excellent. Well, to be fair, that was to be expected. She was a protagonist after all.

However, her appearance seemed to strongly affect the game characters only and had hardly any impact on others. This was quite unexpected for her.

Maria thought that numerous males would flock to court her, but that didn't happen at all.

And that wasn't by chance

After all, in this world, particularly in the noble society, that kind of direct approach was something seen as disgraceful. If a noble wanted to court a female, he would be indirect while trying to gauge the feelings of the opposite gender, closing their distance accordingly.

It was also important to remember that only a few aristocrats were permitted to love freely, in that world, this was a common state of affairs.

Maria didn't know about any of that. And it was not the only thing that she was ignorant about.

The common sense and customs of this world were never introduced in the game at all.

Although it was certainly in part due to a crude work of the developers, that was not the only reason. Ryou initially thought that this game was only an otome game, but actually, that was not the case.

The real genre of this world was a simulation / role-playing game hybrid.

The name of the game itself was Elemental Party.

The game was divided into two parts. The Royal Academy was the part where you grew stronger with your comrades, while the second part was where the comrades that she gathered would spearhead an army fighting against the Devil. Because the latter was actually more important, the party gathering prelude was just an extra which one could enjoy many times.

There were various people available to be invited and exclusive events linked to who the player chose. That was the reason why the trivial details of the story setting were omitted.

Well, to be honest, that still was cutting corners. Overall the content was rather underwhelming and instead of gaining popularity, it ended up as a shitty game that was barely known.

Maria was currently going through the first half part of this flimsy offering. However, this wasn't a game anymore where events would trigger one after another according to the route that she chose, this was an actual world where the surroundings would change according to her actions.

Maria fumbling like this also was an action.

(As long as I have the four of them, nobody else would make a difference.)

The strength of a marquess House member and the royal family was astounding. In addition to this, Maria, being a protagonist, was going to be the main battle character of the future war party too. Other people could only serve as support characters or bait. Having any of them fight would be completely ineffective. Because of that, the second part of the game always played out the same way and the first half didn't have any replayability.

(So, do I just play how I like now? Should be fine I guess. And I think that unlike the start, it is fine to approach them closer now.)

Maria circled the name of the targets that she has chosen. Arnold, Lancelot, Marcus, a descendant of knights from class A, Julius, a wind attribute user who specializes in support magic, and lastly Bruce, an earth attribute user who specializes in defense. Lastly, although his abilities were still unknown, Maria highlighted Rion's name.

"The way Rion carries himself is really suspicious and it makes me quite intrigued. There's also his looks and his black hair... His magic must be strong. There's no way he's not a hidden character."

The hidden character were those whose appearance was triggered by a certain pattern of events. They were all special with abilities comparable to the protagonist.

At least that's how[Elemental Party] handled this concept. This feature should have guaranteed the game's replayability, but because the appearance of those hidden NPC's depended on excessively obscure patterns of actions and because of the game's unpopularity, there were only a few players who ever saw this feature in action, resulting in it being considered something of a myth. It was a huge blunder by the developers.

(Anyway, that woman will join the Academy soon, so the main show is about to start. Gotta get fired up and give it my all.)

The new students were about to enter the Academy. Many of them were crucial characters that Maria was waiting for. Ariel was one of those.

Ariel in the game would be a catalyst for many events. For Maria, her absence as a rival character would make things hard.

Chapter 18

The Day of the Villainess' Ascend to the Stage

Numerous carriages loaded with luggage were arriving one after another. Crammed with personnel handling that baggage, the school gate was in complete turmoil

It was a spectacle that could be seen every year due to the arrival of new school attendees.

In order to avoid that scrum, Rion and Vincent stood beside each other, some distance away from the gate, gazing at the scene.

"They have arrived!"

After finally spotting the carriage they had been waiting for, Rion raised his voice.

"So they have. Shall we go and welcome them?"

"Certainly, sir"

The two of them began running towards the gate. Their destination was a carriage carrying House Windhill coat of arms.

After two of her maids disembarked, Ariel showed up in the carriage's door.

"...Rion."

Spotting Rion who came to pick them up, she muttered his name.

She surprised him by presenting her hands in his direction, but he complied without protest and helped her down. Ariel descended with a satisfied smile.

"I wonder who did you learn this from?"

Ariel asked holding the hand that he offered in assistance.

“Vincent-sama educated me on this subject, milady.”

“Onii-sama did? Since when did my dear brother have this mischievous side to him, I wonder? “

“You wound me, sister, this was not mischief, but consideration.”

“...Which is no less surprising in itself.”

It was the first time that Ariel heard the word “consideration” coming from Vincent.

“Really now. Even I am capable of maturing somewhat. But enough of that for now, we need to move on not to hinder other Houses unduly. Rion, take care of the luggage please.”

This was surprising to hear too. A scene where Vincent would actually pay mind to other people beyond lip service had never occurred in Ariel’s imagination. She thought that Vincent might have matured indeed.

And it was most-likely due to the person who promptly picked up her luggage, Rion.

“Rion, there’s scant need for you to carry all that personally. We are not lacking in number of servants here.”

Rather than having him carry her luggage, having spare time to talk with Rion was more important to Ariel.

“Milady, won’t the rest of staff be busy with Erwin-sama’s belongings?”

“...Now that you mention it.”

It was not unusual for Rion to be considerate to others, but it didn’t sit well with Ariel if the person in question was Erwin.

“Were milady and Erwin-sama not traveling together?”

“We have separated from the start. I decided to depart while they were still in the middle of preparations.”

She recalled telling her parents that travel at a leisurely pace would be preferable and

breaking free from their embrace as they shed tears.

“Is that so... Nevertheless, I will take your luggage now. I imagine it is important to unpack them soon, so taking care of the matter promptly won’t be a bad thing.”

“I suppose you are correct.”

“In that case, please follow me.”

“Oh? You know the way to the ladies’ dormitory? Why is that?”

“Eh? I thought it prudent to be familiar with all places within the premises...”

“...This can’t be faulted. Lead the way then.”

“Milady.”

Ariel’s jealousy was immediately at full throttle right after arrival. Having not realized Ariel’s favor even with this, Rion was considerably thickheaded.

But that was because he convinced himself that Ariel, an aristocrat of a prestigious House, wouldn’t see a mere valet like him as a man that could be together with her.

On the other hand, Vincent, who was forced to see the two of them being like this had glad yet melancholic feelings about it.

After graduating from the Academy, the two would enter adulthood. What was waiting for Ariel there was her marriage to Crown Prince Arnold. Ariel and Rion only had three more years together to spend their time like this.

He was conflicted between wanting them to treasure their prized time together and having them remain oblivious due to the grief that awaited them once the time passed if they became aware of their feelings.

“Onii-sama! If you keep standing there, you will be a hindrance!”

Unaware of the worries of her older brother, the little sister called with an obvious sarcasm tied to the words that Vincent said earlier.

“Yes, yes, I know. I’m coming.”

Vincent could only follow her small back.



After carrying the luggage to the dorm, it was now the handmaidens' job to unpack it. Relieving Rion from his burden, Ariel strolled along the school building accompanied by him.

Their destination was the Lounge.

Vincent didn't come with them. It was to avoid any further troubles from happening. Anyhow, he wanted to avoid coming in contact with Maria and if possible, Lancelot as well. Naturally, this course of action was recommended by Rion

With Vincent being a stepping stone character, that's even less important than the antagonist, his reputation would certainly fall upon coming into contact with Maria.

Although Rion wanted to avoid having Ariel encountering Maria too, such suggestions were doomed to fail. A meeting with Ariel's fiancé, Crown Prince Arnold couldn't be avoided and having to meet with him meant that meeting with Maria was inevitable.

Their business in the Lounge today was precisely to meet Arnold and have Ariel offer her greetings upon joining the Academy. In Ariel's circumstances, this act was an unavoidable responsibility.

"Please inform his highness that lady Ariel Windhill wishes for a moment of his time."

Rion stated their intentions to the usher guarding the entrance.

Hearing this, the royal servant entered the Lounge, most likely to ask for instructions.

"Rion."

"Milady?"

"What is this place?"

"I... believe this is the Lounge?"

Rion was bewildered by the question as Ariel should have known that.

“Is all this ceremony necessary for the meeting to happen?”

“That is so, milady.”

“I see.”

Ariel’s shapely eyebrows knitted together. It was a sign that she was displeased by something.

“Does this notion displease you milady?”

“Are you aware of the Academy’s customs?”

In this Academy, the commoners and royalties were taking lessons together. Although these days the students were assigned to a class mostly accordingly to their social status, originally that wasn’t the case.

The royal family and the aristocrats must hear the voice of the commoners. Overcoming the hurdle of social status difference, they were supposed to improve themselves together. Although the country itself was strict on social positions, for some reason the ideals of the Academy were designed to cross over that gap.

This Lounge’s existence was contradictory to that ideals. Or so Ariel narrated.

“I am aware of this, milady. I also judged it wise not to broach the subject.”

“...Explain?”

Ariel was not happy with Rion’s implied suggestion that this obvious wrong should not be corrected.

“There is nothing to be gained from this.”

“...One should right obvious wrongs.”

“One would expect the Queen to do so. Yes. But milady is yet to take the crown.”

“...That is... Not incorrect.”

Although her displeasure did not subside, she was able to understand him. Ariel

voiced a reluctant assent.

“I apologize for making you wait. His highness, the Crown Prince required time to prepare himself adequately...”

“...Let us proceed, Ariel-sama.”

Rion became visibly discontent at the usher’s words. Since Ariel was Arnold’s fiancée, meeting her was expected of him. Rion thought that proper etiquette demanded that he was the party to initiate the meeting.

But because Ariel didn’t seem to pay it any mind and entered the room without voicing any complaints, Rion also followed after her silently.

The Lounge was occupied by the usual faces.

There were two sofas in the middle of the room facing each other. The one farther from the entrance was occupied by Maria and Arnold, the other one was taken by Charlotte and Lancelot.

This arrangement stoked the flames of anger in Rion’s heart, but just like before, Ariel didn’t mention it with a single word.

She stepped forward, stood in front of the Crown Prince, and bowing elegantly she spoke.

“Your highness, it has been a long time.”

“...So it was.”

Arnold replied to the greetings clearly displeased.

“I have joined the ranks of the students today. I consider it a high honor to be in the same place as your highness from now on.”

“...I see. Is there anything else you require?”

“Nothing at all, I merely came to greet highness.”

“Very well, I bid you a good day then.”

“Of course your highness, I shall excuse myself.”

“Eh?”

Arnold’s eyes had suddenly shown clear confusion. Rion found that attitude and cold words abominable and his impression of the Crown Prince worsened markedly.

“Now then. Rion, let us go back.”

“Milady, this”

As expected, Ariel still didn’t utter a word of complaint and with a composed voice, she only bade Rion to leave with her.

“The matter here is settled, it would be impolite to make onii-sama wait.”

“...Yes, milady.”

If Ariel herself wouldn’t say a word about it, Rion had no choice but to stay silent. But even if that wasn’t the case, there’s no way he could actually voice his complaints directly to Arnold. Still, Rion’s composure tended to desert him when it came to things that would sadden Ariel.

Looking clearly unsatisfied he turned to follow behind Ariel and leave the room.

“Rion-kun”

Not even realizing the wrath burning in Rion’s heart, which could be easily guessed by the tone of her voice, an insensitive voice called out to him. There was only one person that would do such a thing.

Feeling that he was not obligated to answer her, Rion ignored Maria.

“Rion-kun! Wait a little bit!”

Even this was ignored as he headed towards the room’s exit.

“Rude cur! Shouldn’t you answer when people call you?”

A male voice called out reproaching Rion’s attitude. He knew who it was without even

needing to turn his back.

This time, it was not a person that he could ignore. Rion turned his head towards Lancelot.

“Pardon milord? Is there something that you wish from me?”

“Maria has a question for you, filth.”

“Ah, apologies. What is the matter Maria-sama? “

“Since you came here already, would you stay and talk for a while?”

“I’m ashamed to admit to being confused, is that an invitation for lady Ariel?”

“No, I’m inviting you, Rion.”

“In that case, I’m afraid it’s impossible.”

“Why? Since you came here already anyway, wouldn’t it be nice to have a little chat?”

“I am here because I’m attending Ariel-sama, not on my own time.”

“I warn you, stop being rude, Maria is going to great lengths to invite you.”

Lancelot yet again has cut into the conversation. However, Rion couldn’t comprehend the reasoning behind his words. The one who was rude was clearly Maria, not him. But he wasn’t in a position to complain about this.

Normally, Rion would navigate the situation without giving anyone an opportunity to take offense, but right now he was still angry about prince Arnold’s behavior earlier.

So he was not able to bear with this any longer.

“Lancelot-sama, please hear me out.”

“What?”

“This is the Lounge, a special place for high nobility and exceptional students. Don’t you think it would be outrageous for a simple common servant like me to participate

in friendly discussions here?”

“It would... Not be acceptable most of the time. But Maria wishes it, so I shall offer a special dispensation on this occasion.”

After hearing this reply, Rion deduced that reasoning with Lancelot wouldn't go anywhere. His words veiled a sarcasm aimed at Maria who acted as if she owned the place while being just a commoner.

However, Lancelot didn't even notice that and replied normally. Furthermore, being given a special exception just because of Maria was an outcome beyond reason.

Lancelot was clearly in a state where it was unthinkable to expect proper judgment from him.

“Even with your magnanimity milord, I can not do that in good conscience. Forgive me for refusing.”

“Do you really think you can defy me unpunished?”

Hearing this, Rion thought that Lancelot was clearly more suited for the role of a villain.

However letting himself be distracted by such thoughts and not replying promptly was an error on Rion's part. Because now Ariel inserted herself into the conversation.

“And what might you mean by that dear sir?”

“What?”

“Did your hearing suffer with age? I shall repeat myself clearly then. Punishment? What do you mean by that Lancelot Minister Aquasmea?”

“I heard you from the start woman.”

“Then answer my question. Didn't you just say it is rude not to do so?”

“...Your servant's attitude is insulting for a person of my station. It deserves punishment.”

“Tsk, ts. I did not ask what do you see fit punishing, I am asking what do you

understand by punishment.”

“That’s.....”

Lancelot was being overwhelmed by the aura that Ariel was emitting. In times like this, the pressure that Ariel brought to bear would be clearly felt even by her fellow aristocrats of the same rank. Forgetting the wrath within him, Rion was in awe of her demeanor.

“Hmph, unable to answer I see. Let me give you a hand and do so in your stead.”

“...What are you trying to say?”

“If you act in any way against Rion here, I will thoroughly savor the consequences you will face.”

“What did you say!?” “Ariel-sama!”

“This is a person of House Windhill. Acting against him is acting against my House. Is that clear enough?”

“Ariel-sama, that’s...”

“You be quiet. This is a noble dispute, mind yourself.”

“...Ariel Windhill, are you threatening a conflict between our families?”

Because the scope of what Ariel invoked grew huge, Lancelot was shaken. In reality, a marquess house wouldn’t make a move over a mere valet, but it seemed that comprehending that was beyond Lancelot at the moment.

“You started this Lancelot. The fault is yours too. Don’t you agree, your highness?”

“Ah, Eh, Yes”

*Because the subject was suddenly brought up to his attention, Arnold inadvertently agreed.

*(*TN: Read as Pushover.)*

“In that case, we are done here. Rion, we are leaving.”

“...At once, milady”

Ariel concluded the conversation before Arnold could even take back his words of agreement. With this, the incident ended in her favor.

But even so, Rion couldn't help but curse his carelessness. He should've already learned that cases such as this wouldn't end well, just like how they never did when Vincent was involved.

“Ariel-sama.”

“Yes Rion?”

“I think it would be for the best to avoid unnecessary conflicts in the future. “

“...This was nothing of the sort, I did what I had to.”

“Milady did it to cover for me. I am grateful, but that was not yet required at that moment.”

“I disagree”

“I am a tool that should be of use to you. Milady should not tangle herself into conflicts over tools like me.”

“But...”

Rion was unhappy with the actions she took for his sake. Ariel almost voiced her displeasure with his reaction but stopped herself with her face turning peevish.

“Please value yourself more. Having a confrontation against another marquess house, furthermore one involving the Crown Prince himself would deal a huge amount of damage to milady's position.”

“...It's fine.”

“There's no way...”

“Ah stop already, it really is fine Arnold has hated me already for quite some time now.”

“Eh?”

“The Crown Prince hates me. He always did, far before the betrothal came to be. “

“...Why is that?”

It was the first time Rion heard this story.

“I wonder... I was still unaware of the circumstances back then. I believe back then I was really looking forward to meeting him and gave it my all to be a fitting partner for his highness.”

“So why did he come to hate you despite that?”

“Because I overdid it on our first meeting with my desire to be a proper fiancée? For any number of other small reasons? I do not even really know which ones exactly. All of them perhaps?”

She could now properly look back at her previous actions, something which she failed to do during that time. It was not just because she had grown up. It was also because her feelings have already changed from back then.

“To think that Ariel-sama was this serious about his highness...”

But Rion failed to comprehend that.

“...Only feelings that are conveyed from the start matter, the ones that are unsaid hold no value.”

“I disagree milady, I believe you will be rewarded for thinking of your partner and working to fit him better. Even if you never said that you care so much.”

Rion paused realizing that his words were careless. More so because he himself did not believe that.

“Rion?”

“...Feelings that are hidden hurt.”

“Yes, they do”

“But even so, thinking about the well being of your precious person and giving it your all for their sake, even if it brings you nothing in return.....”

“Yes?”

“I believe it still can bring happiness.”

“I see... I suppose you are right.”

He said he didn't just “think” but “believe” that was the case. Ariel was not someone that would miss small details like this. Rion believed that he would still find happiness even if his feelings were not rewarded. However, what about herself? When she began thinking about that she couldn't find it in herself to agree with him. Her reason knew that she shouldn't think that way. However, her feelings disagreed.

Even if she acted mature, the feelings within Ariel's heart were rather childish.

Chapter 19

The Desires of the Villainess

The surroundings were still dark and the sky was shining with starlight. In one of the quiet school backyards so densely covered in trees that one might mistake it for a forest, only the swings of Rion's sword could be heard.

That was the place where Rion conducts his daily practice sessions.

His morning training consisted solely of practice swinging to enhance his physical strength and foundations. He had to do it alone and there was no other than that place where he could practice in seclusion

He started with sprints and then switched to muscle building afterward. Before, his training regimen finished at this point, but now he could even increase the intensity up to two-fold with no problems.

The thought of increasing duration also came to his mind, but it was rejected due to time constraints. He had to obtain the strength to kill Maria within the three year period he would spend at the Academy. Any spare time needed to be directed towards acquiring skills that could be used in actual battle.

That being said, Rion knew very little about live combat. Although he was able to accumulate experience by fighting demonic beasts from time to time, in the end, that was still fighting against a kind of animal. It was different from a battle with a human able to use magic and swordsmanship.

Because of that, he had to rely on his own imagination to figure out things that could work in that scenario.

His deliberations led him into concluding that he needed to polish his magic. The reason being that he couldn't improve swordsmanship much by self-study anyway and if there was something that could be counted as his advantage over Maria, it would be the multiple magic attributes that he could use.

He thought that using this to the fullest was the wiser course of action.

As he drawn his sword numerous motes of light began surrounding Rion. Looking closely, one would notice that they were not uniform in color. The ones tinted brilliant crimson belonged to the spirit Rion named [Sarah], the ones shining blue on the other hand belonged to the water spirit [Diane].

The color of their attributes was hard to distinguish because there was no need to use their power at the moment. What was currently happening could be in simple words, a formation training.

Rion figured out the way to call the spirits without unnecessarily expending their strength by himself.

The normal way was using your own mana as an offering to call out the spirits and then using them to activate your spell by channeling your mana. Rion was able to call them without expending mana because they were always beside him at all times and they decided to lend their strength to him on their own. That relationship was not like a contract with mana as a currency, but rather something more akin to a friendship. Rion was not aware of this distinction, but despite that, he was still able to develop the relationship further.

“Sarah, Diane, let’s start with the first formation, the F1”

That was how Rion usually gave his spirits instructions. Since he was doing this subconsciously and was interacting with them as if with an equal, the spirits really liked that part of him.

Expecting that following his request might make him happy, the spirits assumed formation. Diane was assigned defense duty, Sarah’s role, on the other hand, was offense. The water spirit was swirling around Rion’s body while Sarah was spreading out in front and above him.

With their formation in place, Rion lunged forward at a conspicuously huge tree. Diane kept circling around him without separating and Sarah awaited further instructions while above.

“Now! Sarah!”

On Rion’s order, Sarah dived forward towards the surrounding trees, a weaving streak of light like a cruise missile.

It hit the targeted tree but there was no explosion, the light motes only floated around it. A moment later Rion's sword struck the tree he aimed at.

"...The timing was perfect. We need to test this on some demonic beasts afterward guys."

Just like this, he was figuring out a better way to utilize the spirits in battle but this was not merely using his multiple attributes anymore, he was simultaneously using both types of magic. Furthermore, while he was doing that, it was not a distraction for his bladework.

Like this, there would be hardly anyone within the school premises that could stand their ground against Rion in a duel. However, what Rion aimed to defeat was the protagonist protected by the world. No matter how much he trained, he could not be certain of victory.

Knowing that himself, Rion wouldn't be satisfied with just this. Utilizing the knowledge from his previous world, he wanted to attempt transcending current world's norms.

Had someone asked him what he wanted the most, this would be his answer. Rion thought that there was no way of defeating the world other than breaking past its norms.

Concentrating deeply he faced the spirits with his full power to forestall the resistance they tended to show at this moment.

"...Guys, please get along."

Again, he outlined his thoughts to them with his words. Although visibly reluctant, the spirits gave consent. Having that, he conveyed a specific idea.

"Icy Lance"

The color hues began mixing and from that fusion, a lance made of ice was born.

"Go forth."

His hand, that was raised in the air, swung downwards. The icy lance flew straight at the tree that Rion's hand was pointing at.

“...A hit... But.”

The magic projectile successfully made a hole in the tree. But despite that Rion was not satisfied. The damage didn't look any different to using the water lance that Diane could make on her own.

“But what?”

“Eh?!”

Even though he carefully checked the surroundings, there was a sound of a new voice that wasn't supposed to be there. Furthermore, it belonged to someone that he knew.

He timidly turned his head towards the source and sure enough, Ariel was standing there.

“...Good morning, milady.”

“Good morning to you as well, Rion”

“Isn't it too early for milady to be awake? Is there something you require urgently?”

“I knew you would be up early to train and I wanted to watch.”

“...I find it quite amazing that milady was able to find this place.”

“Somehow, I managed.”

“Somehow...?”

“I have a good sense of direction. Thanks to that I got to see sooo many interesting things.”

“...Is that so?”

Although he knew it would end like this the very beginning, Rion's attempt at diversion ended in failure

In his mind he was complaining to the spirits with all his might as he told them to warn him if someone was approaching. Sarah and Diane were having none of that, they

expected that meeting Ariel would make Rion happy and they did not understand why was he complaining at all.

Due to that Rion understood why Ariel was able to find the place. Clearly, the spirits helped her find the way.

“What was that magic just now?”

Ariel asked the question that Rion didn't want to hear from her.

“It was my attempt at a new water attribute spell milady.”

“What was that magic just now?”

She repeated. However this time with knitted eyebrows, clearly angry that Rion was lying.

“...It was a fusion of two attributes.”

Being seen through, Rion felt he wouldn't be able to defy her anymore so he replied honestly.

“Fusion? What do you mean by that?”

“It's like mixing them together and using both at the same time?”

“...So you mixed two different attributes into one spell?”

“Yes, milady.”

“Rion, you really are...”

Ariel always accepted all the outrageous things that Rion showed he was capable of. For example, that was the case when she found out that he had two attributes when she had already deduced that it might've been the case from the beginning rather than doubt him.

However, in this situation even she was surprised by his preposterous attempt.

“...I beg your forgiveness milady.”

“What for? You did nothing wrong. I just can’t imagine how did you manage to pull this off.”

“I... just asked?”

“.....”

Because she thought that Rion was making a fool out of her Ariel’s eyes narrowed and her gaze turned cold. Naturally, that was never Rion’s intention.

“How to explain this... They were not getting along at first, so I tried to make it possible by having them reconcile.”

“.....”

Although he tried following up with a more comprehensive explanation, that, unfortunately, didn’t seem to work either.

“Erm...”

“...You... are actually serious?”

“Yes, milady.”

“...Reconcile? Them?”

“Sarah and Diane don’t seem to really like each other that much, so I tried meditating between them and begged for cooperation.”

“Who are Sarah and Diane?”

“My... I guess it would be fine to call them spirits? Those beings that give form to the spells.”

“Spirits... Right, you said before that you thought that spirits were the origin of magic.”

“Well, I am still not sure if that is the proper way to call them. However, I am certain they have a sentience, distinct personalities and are able to understand requests.”

“...This is not something I am capable of.”

Ariel had confidence in her magical prowess. However, she couldn't feel the same sort of connection to spirits that Rion had and that made her be a little bit down.

"Is that so, milady? I am confident this is not unique to me and everyone should be capable of that. Milady too."

"...Why do you think so?"

"I believe the reason why milady was able to find this place was because you were guided by your spirit. With a little help from Sarah and Diane."

"My spirit?"

In regards to the source of magic she called mana, Ariel was not conscious of them to the point of calling them her possession. If being aware of them was the only qualification for using magic, that would make anyone in the world able to cast spells.

However, Rion gave them names and discussed the matters about his magic like he would do with his friends. And he was saying that it was that kind of entity that guided her towards this place.

"Will be able to interact with them as well, I wonder?"

"Milady can feel them already. So all that's left is giving them a name, though that will be hard as we won't be able to tell the gender yet, and accepting them as a partner."

"Even if you say accept..."

"Why won't milady give them a name for a start? Things feel more familiar and closer once they are named."

"Name... I wonder what would be nice?"

Seeing that Rion actually came up with names himself, Ariel naturally wanted to imitate him. Although she was still in doubt, she tried to think of a name just as she was told.

"Would Sylph suffice with it being a wind attribute spirit? Sylphine seems fine as well."

"Rion, like this..."

“...Ah, like this it won’t do, will it? Do excuse me. It will not be a personal bond if the name doesn’t come from you. But if I might offer a tip, how about taking a part of a longer or complex name that you like? That is what I did.”

“...What did “Sarah” and “Diane” come from?”

“Sarah is a fire spirit, so I shortened the word Salamander, while Diane comes from the word Undine.”

“...I see. This makes sense, if it was just me, I’d come up with something weird.”

“I’m sure that’s not true, milady. What is the name that comes to your mind?”

“Right... I thought about *[Rufii]? Is it odd?”

*(*TN: Because Shir**u**fiine)*

“Not at all. This is milady’s spirit, the name you like will definitely be fine.”

“Alright, let’s call it Rufii. What comes after naming it?”

“Please raise your hand like you would feed a bird and call it over audibly. It will eat some of your internal mana, do not get angry about that.”

“I understand.”

Ariel did as Rion told and raised her right hand, palm up, like feeding an invisible bird.

“.....Rufii.”

She called out the name timidly.

The response arrived immediately. Numerous particles of light, like a swarm of fireflies, began to flicker around her hand. The number of light motes began to steadily increase and they started getting brighter.

Before long, not just her arms but her whole body became clad in the light.

“Ohh, as expected of Ariel-sama.”

Rion couldn't help but voice his admiration. The contrast with the time when he first called upon the spirits was obvious. The number of the spirits in Ariel's surroundings was way higher than in his and Rion thought that she was clearly loved by them very much. He also had one more impression.

"...Beautiful"

The sun began peeking from beyond the horizon painting the eastern sky. In the dim, wooded backyard, Ariel dazzling with the spirit-light illumination looked like an angel or a goddess descending to earth.



After school that day.

On Ariel's order, Rion guided her within the school premises. It wasn't really needed, though, Ariel only used that excuse to make him accompany her.

Probably due to the incident from this morning, Ariel was in a good mood. Her outward appearance might not differ from usual, but Rion could see it from her demeanor. Aside from him, the only other people that would likely notice such a thing would be Vincent and their parents.

Rion wanted the day to end on the same note, but the situation didn't develop as he wanted it to.

"Hmm, what are they doing over there?"

Letting Ariel notice the spectacle was Rion's mistake. He wanted to guide Ariel away before that happened.

"The mood over there doesn't seem to be very good, milady. I'm somewhat curious too, but it would be probably prudent not to get involved."

Although he attempted to divert her attention from the scene, it was futile.

"It seems the sour mood is the fruit of his majesty labors."

"...That does look very likely indeed, milady."

In front of Arnold, the central figure of the gathering in question, there was a group of, judging by exquisite hairstyles, noble ladies, trembling and looking overwhelmed. Behind him, one could spot a sheltering figure of Maria.

With this, Rion was able to get a good idea of what was happening.

“Come Rion, let’s join them.”

“Milady, please, we should really not interrupt...”

“.....Why?”

“This looks like a very delicate situation and we are not certain what caused it...”

“That much is obvious, I wish to know the reasons.”

“But...”

“Stay if you wish, I’ll go on my own.”

“If milady goes, so do I.”

There was no way to stop her. Rion knew that from the very beginning, but he still cursed his incompetence. Forcing his heavy-feeling feet to move forward, Rion followed after his mistress.

When they approached closer, they heard Arnold demanding an explanation from the ladies he was facing.

“I will ask once again. What are you all doing to Maria?”

“N-Nothing, your highness.”

“Why is she crying then!?”

“T-That woman selfishly...”

“You don’t have any valid reason, do you!?”

“But...”

As Rion suspected, Maria was being harassed and Arnold who happened to see the situation interfered to help her. There's no mistake that it was one of the events that would make her get closer to the Crown Prince. Or one of those that would involve Ariel getting entangled to be worthlessly concluded with her getting angry.

"Good day, your highness, I'm happy to meet you here."

Oblivious to Rion's uneasiness, Ariel entered the scene and greeted the Crown Prince in a perfectly inoffensive way.

"...Ariel"

Sure enough, Crown Prince Arnold was facing the female students with a scolding look and if things went badly that gaze would turn to Ariel.

"May I ask why is everyone in such a place?"

"This has nothing to do with you."

"Nevertheless, it is sad to see a group of ladies being chastised by a lord in public."

"What did you say?"

She did not clash with Maria but spoke as if trying to pick a fight with Arnold instead. It was an unparalleled impertinence for Rion to cut into their conversation, but even knowing that he felt he had to.

"Milady, wouldn't it be prudent to learn all the facts first."

"That's perfectly unnecessary."

"May I ask why?"

"The situation is clear. The ladies here did something to the commoner girl and that made his highness angry."

"Aren't they at fault then? Isn't a scolding to be expected as a consequence?"

"That way of thinking is naive and simplistic."

“Could I ask for explanation?”

“Disputes among high society ladies are commonplace. Having a man, and a royal at that, get involved in those is just not done. Elementary etiquette, Rion.”

“Is that the case?”

“Yes.”

What Ariel was saying was an unspoken rule among the ladies of the high echelons of society. Bringing in a man’s authority into a conflict between women was considered tasteless. A person that did that, even if it brought them triumph, would be later on shunned in the social circle.

She was trying to apply that convention to the situation at hand. Although Rion didn’t know if that was an appropriate thing to do, he was able to guess why she tried.

“However, if a conflict like this escalated, wouldn’t that call for outside mediation?”

“It absolutely would.”

“Who would be the best-suited person for that role?”

“The most senior lady of the aristocratic world of course. The Queen herself.”

“...I see.”

But there was no way the Queen would bother coming to the Academy just to settle a squabble between female students. So would it mean that a dispute between the female students in the Royal Academy could not be resolved?

“I doubt you failed to notice, but mother is not here, do you intend to replace her as the mediator?”

Arnold interrupted the explanations with his usual displeased expression.

“Your highness, why would I ever wish such hassle on myself?”

“Wasn’t all this just now to use your position as my fiancée to do it?”

“Highness, I am neither a princess nor a Queen yet. Just a candidate for one by virtue of betrothal. I am under no illusion about being granted special privileges just with this.”

“What?”

The way Ariel phrased this brought up a possibility of breaking off their engagement.

“What your highness should do now, is to designate someone from the Academy to be your esteemed mother’s surrogate in matters like this. It would help resolve this and any future disputes that are bound to happen.”

“I do not necessarily have to nominate you, do I?”

“Of course not. I have just enrolled here, this kind of burden would suit an upperclassman better.”

This could be easily understood as Ariel’s refusal to mediate as the Queen’s surrogate, and Arnold did actually take it this way.

“...Well then, I’ll nominate anyone other than you.”

“That is perfectly fine, your highness.”

Arnold’s attempt at sarcasm was shrugged off by Ariel. Having run out of rebuttals, the prince left the scene looking vexed. Maria, following right after was clearly delighted. Although at first she was perplexed about Ariel’s attitude, she became happy with the gap between Ariel and the prince obviously expanding due to this direct confrontation.

Although Rion understood Maria’s feelings, he couldn’t suppress his annoyance.

“I kept you waiting Rion. Now that this is over, where will you take me next?”

“...Milady.”

“I want to fully enjoy my Academy life. I do not welcome any extra tasks that would be a distraction from that.”

“...Yes, milady”

Rion was able to deduce from those words that Ariel wanted a change of mood. Although his irritation at Maria didn't lessen, he agreed with Ariel's sentiment.

"All of you as well, won't you stop wasting my precious time on such trivial things?"

The female students that felt relieved after the Crown Prince's departure instantly turned pale at Ariel's words. They immediately knew that she was genuinely angry. They were also aware that a genuinely angry Ariel would be incomparably scarier than Arnold could ever be.

"Milady, should we go to the cafeteria next? There are some inexpensive but delicious desserts I wish to recommend. Because milady doesn't usually get to taste such things, why not use this as an opportunity?"

Once Rion stopped indulging himself with idle thinking and noticed the shivering female students, he made a light-hearted suggestion.

"Let's do that. If that's what Rion suggests then that's fine."

Ariel's severe expression changed into a sweet smile as she faced Rion.

"Well then, lead on."

"At once, milady"

To Ariel, everything other than spending her time with Rion was pointless. She wanted to make as many sweet memories with him as she could within the time she had left. That was Ariel's only wish for her school life.

Chapter 20

Even the Villainess has Gentle Days Sometimes

He didn't know whether it was fate or the influence of the game settings, but Rion carried hatred towards the absurd power controlling this world anyhow.

He must never let Ariel and Maria come in contact with each other. Rion worked hard with that thought in mind, but in the end, it was futile.

The girls always end up clashing against each other about every little thing. The blame did not lie with Rion's inability to separate them. It was all due to Maria's expectation that the more she clashed with Ariel the more her relationship with Arnold would develop causing her to proactively seek confrontation. Maria's goal was making Ariel angry, to provoke public chastisements.

With things moving in Maria's desired direction, no matter how hard Rion tried, attempting to prevent those clashes would be a struggle.

Furthermore, the more the surroundings become aware of those confrontations, the more the event proceed in the direction that Rion did not want them to.

Before Ariel even knew it, the students carrying animosity towards Maria had made her their standard bearer and used the fact to increase the severity of their own harassment. They even went as far as to act as if it was Ariel who ordered them to do so.

As far as Rion was concerned the situation was getting worse, but to Maria, it was the opposite.

"I-It hurts..."

Rion's mind, preoccupied with these thoughts, was forcefully brought back to reality by Ariel pinching his cheeks.

"Why are you making such a grim face?"

“Just thinking about some things, milady.”

“Even though I should be the focus of your attention?”

“I... I-It’s related to milady.”

“...Elaborate, please?”

“I was musing on how to bridge the divide between Lady Ariel and His Highness.”

It was a lie, but only partly. That being one of the things always present in his mind was the truth.

In the end that, was one of the solutions he arrived at. By making the Crown Prince Arnold not consider canceling their marriage, the bad ending would be avoided. From Rion’s perspective Maria, being an obstacle to reaching good outcomes, should be disposed of, but he also had to think about the next course of action if that plan ended in failure.

The only thing that he could think of was to improve Ariel’s relationship with Arnold.

“...Really, that subject again.”

“I can’t help it, milady”

“Does being with me bore you to that extent?”

“Never.”

“Then keep me company properly. Stop looking past me to other things.”

“I shall. But is it really fine to spend time with me instead of His Highness?”

“...The prospect of more time with prince Arnold is not interesting at all.”

“It is... not?”

Displeasure crept up onto Ariel’s face. It seems she was not pleased with Rion bringing up Arnold all the time.

“Accompanying His Highness would not be enjoyable.”

“There is no need to say things like this so loud milady.”

“I raised my voice to make you hear clearly. I do not wish to visit the Lounge, it will only worsen my mood.”

“...Is that so.”

Even though at first Ariel would always head towards the Lounge just to greet the Crown Prince, now she wouldn't even take a step in that direction.

With Maria's conquests going smoothly, the Lounge turned into a place for Maria and the male students belonging to her reverse harem. One after another, the boys would whisper sweet words in order to attract her attention. Just looking at that made Rion's mood sour too.

The only good thing there was that Arnold didn't belong to that circle. Rion took that as a sign that he was not completely captured yet which was exactly why he thought there still was a chance.

“Would milady prefer me to invite him here instead?”

“And what makes you think that Crown Prince would deign to visit a cafeteria?”

“...That does seem improbable.”

Currently, Ariel and Rion were in the Academy's cafeteria. This place was indeed not somewhere that a crown prince would visit, but to be fair, the same could be said about someone like Ariel.

Only commoners used the cafeteria, the odd noble to be spotted there would invariably belong to the lowest noble class. Even though that was the case, no one there would dare to look coldly on a true aristocrat sharing a table with her valet or voice a complaint about that happening.

This was the exact reason Rion and Ariel started coming there for conversations.

However, lack of criticism didn't equal to lack of attention. There was no way people would ignore Ariel who was not only beautiful but also from a powerful family. That

was especially true for the male students.

Many of them thought to use the opportunity in order to strike a conversation with her, but regarding their intentions, Ariel was as thickheaded as Rion.

This was also partly a result of her somewhat haughty attitude making her care little of what her surroundings think, but fortunately, that was not noticeable to people who didn't even manage to establish a conversation with her.

In the end, a rumor with little grounding in reality arose describing her as an amiable person that would even use the cafeteria despite her status.

Not that Ariel had the slightest bit of interest in that either.

"Rion, would you happen to know what is occupying my older brother today?"

It wasn't just Ariel that used this place, but Vincent as well. He also longed for the relaxed relationship that the three of them had when they were in the mansion.

"Lord Vincent is studying, milady."

"...Oh, I see, the exams are coming indeed."

"Yes, milady. If he wants to raise his rank any more, he needs to work hard, so this is not unexpected."

"From your way of talking, you are confident he will succeed, aren't you?"

"As brazen as it sounds, I consider his results merely satisfactory."

"Satisfactory?"

"He was rated fifteenth at the last round of exams, he should really aim to enter top ten at once."

Vincent was able to steadily raise his ranking. His current results were rather surprising for someone being called as the failure of the House Windhill.

"Just fifteenth? You are right, my brother should put more effort into it. "

Ariel was such a superior younger sister that it made Vincent cry at times.

"This is exactly why he resolved to try even harder this time."

"I see. What about Rion?"

"Milady? I am not subject to exams?"

"I know that. I was asking if you are really fine with not studying."

"Once Lord Vincent is done studying a subject, he lends me his notes and books."

"Are you able to understand everything with just that?"

"I think I am doing fine."

"I see. Let's ask a question then."

"Eh?"

"A small test to see if you really do learn. Hmm, what should I ask about..."

Ariel was having fun trying to come up with a question. Because this was something they also used to do back at the mansion, being able to spend time this way again was enjoyable to her.

"Ah, now that I think about it... This is not a question, but there is something I'd like Rion's opinion on."

"Yes, milady?"

"Do you agree with the idea of [A small sacrifice for the greater good]?"

"More or less."

"Can you explain what do you mean by that?"

"The idea is broad, which aspect of it is milady interested in?"

"Those that are to stand at the top of the society are taught to be ready to sacrifice

small things for the greater good of all. What can be considered small is, however, often glossed over. Which things are small enough? Is it really fine to discard them just because they appear insignificant? “

“Milady... This... This is a hard topic. “

Topics like those always caused Ariel's sincerity to resurface. This particular idea didn't fit with her sense of responsibility as a powerful aristocrat.

That was exactly why Rion was finding it hard to formulate an answer. Although Ariel's way of thinking could be considered righteous, he knew that finding a practical manner of applying it in life was the hard part.

“I do not, personally, believe that there is a right answer to these questions. I'm just asking what Rion thinks of this.”

“My thoughts...”

Faced with that, he had to come up with an answer now.

“Don't look for an answer that you think will make me happy. Just honestly say what you think about this.”

Ariel was really sharp in those kinds of moments.

“I... Alright. Let me start by saying there's nothing I hold as more important than other things.”

“Rion, there's nobody that can confidently state such a thing.”

“Still, I believe it to be true milady. I have nothing I put a particular priority on. What's more, my hands are full of small problems that don't stop coming.”

“Go on...”

“But that, in a way, is also good. There was a proverb I heard some time ago I think is apt here [There are no unimportant threads in a tapestry].”

This was actually a quote from Ryou's favorite historical essay that was present at the back of Rion's mind. The sole hobby of Ryou, who struggled for money, was to read.

He used all means necessary to borrow his favorite history book series in the library.

His arguments when talking with Ariel and Vincent about topics like this were based on those books.

“What does that mean?”

“It means that no problems are truly small. Overlooking something that seems trivial now, might lead to huge consequences later on.”

“Doesn’t the proverb stand in direct opposition to our discussion topic then?”

“Somewhat. But in the end, they complement each other nicely.”

“...How so?”

“This ties to Lady Ariel’s initial question. Which matters are trivial? Aren’t all, even small, problems important in the end? “

“What could be considered “trifling” in that case?”

“In my opinion... Things like pride for example.”

“Did I hear that correctly?”

Ariel’s eyebrows knitted when she heard Rion’s words. An aristocrat’s pride, that was one of the things that Ariel considered very important.

“I believe that if pride is at stake when protecting something important, one should set it aside.”

“Set it aside... As in discarding one’s status?”

“If that was the only way to save the fief, what would milady do?”

“I...”

“I’m sorry, that example was rather extreme.”

“No, I do get what you are saying. but...”

Protecting the fiefdom was an aristocrat's responsibility. Even if she had that sort of mindset, it would still be hard for Ariel to consider discarding her position.

"I see the question is troubling. In that case, why don't we first determine what pride is?"

"Determine?"

"Is high social status alone worth being proud of?"

"...It is not. Even if one falls from grace retaining proper poise and noble conduct is equally worth being proud about."

"That is so. I believe it is important that Lady Ariel is of House Windhill. But having a resolve to consider that trivial and discard it when necessity calls, isn't that even more important? "

"I understand. I will bear Rion's words in mind."

"...Milady?"

"Yes?"

"My ideas are not necessarily correct, giving them undue weight may be unwise."

"...That is true. However, on reflection, I happen to agree with what you said."

"Ah... But..."

Rion's face turned red from embarrassment. He felt ashamed about conveying his points to Ariel in such a self-important manner. The truth is, this was the second time that this has happened to him.

"So Rion, does this make you Ariel's new tutor from now on?"

"Milord!?"

The reason for Rion's other embarrassing memory arrived. He became even more flustered but even though he was still shaken, he immediately left his seat and vacated the chair in front of Ariel.

“Sir, have you gotten hungry?”

“Correct, that’s why I came.”

“In that case, I shall arrange a meal immediately.”

Just like that, Rion went to the counter to order and prepare Vincent’s food. It was also a convenient moment to regain his composure.

“Older brother, are you really done with your studies?”

Ariel was displeased because her conversation with Rion was interrupted.

“I am currently stuck and can’t seem to make any progress, so I came here for a change of mood.”

“Be honest, isn’t that just an excuse?”

“It is. But the desire to refresh my head is not a lie.”

“I see.”

“Leaving that aside for a moment, your discussion just now seemed rather difficult.”

“Rion’s argument was rather complex, but the topic was something that randomly came to my mind.”

“Well, the outcome was rather good.”

“It was. And I found it easier to agree with Rion’s views than with my teacher’s.”

“He does have that side to him. It made me learn a lot of things too.”

“Oh, is that so?”

“Earlier I experienced an event that was practical application of your discussion topic, I think that was what caused me to start changing.”

That exact incident was a source of Rion’s embarrassment.

“...What happened?”

“I managed to put aside something unimportant that was weighing on me greatly.”

“Older Brother, stop being so vague.”

“I discarded silly things like shame and vanity. The whole persona of Vincent the heir, with its unwanted baggage.”

“Brother!?”

Vincent’s words shocked Ariel. She was really looking forward to seeing how he would go about governing the fief. In this, she had Rion’s support so far.

“Relax, I am just talking about that specific mentality.”

“Even so!”

“Sister. Hear me, please. At first, I thought I would get everything just by being an heir, that I deserve everything I want. Rion showed me that this way of thinking is wrong. That the role of heir demands as many sacrifices as it grants boons.”

“...What sacrifices?”

“Nobody wants to get to know me, they all desire to know the future lord Windhill. People don’t bow because they respect me, they bow in front of the heir of the House. No one really cares for Vincent, to see beyond the title he carries.”

“Older brother...”

This was true both here and in the Windhill mansion. Ariel was aware that even though the staff showed superficial respect, deep inside they all mocked her brother.

“This is not true for the closest family of course, but for others, the only important thing is the role I represent.”

“...I... can’t disagree. But this is not unexpected.”

“It is not. But thanks to Rion I am aware of that now and I understand the consequences.”

“I see.”

It has been a long time since Ariel had a one-on-one conversation with her brother. His growth vastly exceeded her expectations.

That was thanks to Rion who... Was currently intimately conversing with a female student at the cafeteria counter?

“...Hmm!?”

Ariel couldn't help but notice that they were really getting along.

“I-I am certain he does that for our sake sister.”

Vincent, having realized what was going on, tried to cover for his valet in panic.

“Oh, I'm sure he does. But he doesn't have to do it right now, does he?”

“That... True... But...”

“Oh. He's coming back now.”

“He is? Does he have a death wish?!”

Rion, unaware of the rage blooming inside Ariel, came back to the table with that female student in tow of all things.

“I apologize for making you wait, sir.”

“Ah n-no... I-It wasn't long.”

“Sir, is something amiss?”

“You... Really... Who is the lady behind you?”

Vincent asked trying hard not to look at Ariel sitting in front of him with a murderous

“You, go ask him.” stare.

“Oh, this is Miss Mia. There is something she's really keen to do, so I invited her to come with me.”

Rion kept being completely oblivious to the reason behind Vincent's nerves.

"Isn't there a better time for these things?"

"I thought about it, sir, but came to a conclusion it might as well happen now."

"...In Ariel's presence?"

"Wouldn't it be impossible if milady was not here? I'm sorry milord, but this is all very confusing. Miss Mia is here exactly because she really wants to talk to her."

"Eh?"

"She really seems to look up to Lady Ariel and if short conversation is impossible she hoped to at least shake milady's hand."

"...She's admiring me?"

Ariel's clouded face underwent a complete change, faced with a situation she could not comprehend, she looked completely mystified.

"Yes, milady. That seems to be the case."

"Erm... Mia-san?"

"Y-Yes!?"

The female student replied awestruck.

"Would you really be content with a handshake?"

Ariel's words stirred the air in the cafeteria.

Mia was keenly aware of that, but still timidly reached out with her hand.

"Oh come on now, there's no need to be scared like that. Let us shake hands."

Ariel reached out as well and shook the hand of the hesitating girl.

"...Thank you very much!"

“W-Why are you so happy...”

Mia’s excitement caused Ariel to turn red from embarrassment.

“Cute...”

“Eh?”

“Forgive my lapse, lady, that was terribly rude of me.”

While Ariel was still embarrassed, Mia’s nervousness faded away. She timidly began a conversation as if her previous stiffness was a lie.

“Why would I find words of honest praise rude?”

“Truly? Oh, thank goodness.”

“...Won’t you take a seat?”

The surrounding atmosphere became even more charged than before.

“Is it really fine?”

“Why not? It seems inherently silly to worry about social standing in a simple cafeteria. It’s one of the charms that draws me here.”

“...In that case, I’ll gladly accept Lady Ariel’s invitation.”

“““Eh?! That’s unfair!!”““

Finally, the tension in the air exploded. There were many people present besides Mia that wanted to get closer to Ariel.

A lot of them gave up and resigned to just looking because they thought Ariel’s position put her out of their reach. But now that a commoner like Mia managed to sit at the same table, their perspectives looked completely different.

“...What is happening right now?”

“Everyone here would also love to chat with Lady Ariel.”

Thinking that getting ahead of others might have been bad, Mia interceded on behalf of the other students.

“With me?”

“Yes, Lady Ariel. I’m more than certain that is the case.”

“...But why? And what about?”

“Anything really. A few minutes in your company would delight them to no end.”

“Unbelievable...”

Ariel was visibly bewildered. This kind of situation was obviously a first for her. She was having a hard time thinking of how to deal with the crowd.

That being the case, it was now Rion’s turn to act.

“Everyone! Because it’s obviously not possible to have you come all at once, let us start with people at the table closest to us for now.”

“Yes! Yes please!” “Me too! Me too, by all means, I would like to talk”

“Me too!” “Me! Please pick me!”

The students on the table that Rion pointed out immediately raised their hands. All of them. That was exactly why Rion picked only these four.

“No way!?” “That’s unfair!” “That’s right! Let’s settle this with lottery!”

Immediately, the students that were not picked protested in outrage.

“...Why on earth? Isn’t this all just too much?”

Ariel was still surprised. She could not comprehend why all those people would find it that exciting just a conversation with her.

“I can’t say I’m clear on the reasons either, milady. But wouldn’t this be a nice diversion from your usual routine?”

“...I suppose.”

“However, all this chaos will just not do...”

The volume of the arguing voices continued to rise. It was reinforced by a group of people joining the racket for the fun of it. As the uproar developed...

“Silence! There will be opportunities for all of you! Wait your turn and rein in your enthusiasm!”

Vincent’s loud voice quieted everyone down. No one here wanted to make a high noble angry.

“But! In exchange for your patience, House Windhill will take on the bill for everyone in this cafeteria! Eat and drink your fill!”

Vincent’s generous pronouncement left everyone puzzled. It was so sudden that they didn’t know how to take his words.

“Mind your schedules, however! Don’t make this a reason to be late to class and cause trouble for Lord Vincent! Is that clear to everyone!?”

Following these words of Rion the cafeteria erupted with students’ cheers. Hearing Rion’s practical addendum, everyone understood that it would be fine to take Vincent’s words at face value.

Expressions of gratitude surrounded Vincent from all directions. Some students immediately stood up and ordered more drinks.

Nobody objected to this clamor, although it was far from silent.

As for those lucky students who now sat at the same table as Windhills.

“...Right. That one time Lord Vincent said...”

“Hey! I heard that! What kind of valet uses his lord to make others laugh?!”

“The best one, like me.”

“You!”

“Sir, it’s just a bit of harmless entertainment...”

“Absolutely not!”

It was clear to Rion that this was the right moment to clear away the bad rumors about Vincent, who was in high spirits and only partially angry at being made fun of.

Seeing that overly serious appearance broke the ice and made the invited students feel accepted. This caused the table to get really lively...

Ariel too set aside her aristocratic demeanor and wore a laughing face befitting her age. This was the first time she saw a group of people entertained by such a silly talk. The time she spent with Rion and her older brother had once again developed into something fun.

In the far corner of the room, there was a group watching the commotion with cold eyes.

“What a meaningless popularity. These commoners don’t even hail from their fief. Idiotic and incomprehensible.”

The one who said this as if about to spit in disgust was Lancelot. Even though he and his company came to the cafeteria in order to garner popularity among the commoners too following Maria’s suggestion.

“Hey, Arnold. Don’t you think so too?”

“...Huh... So she can actually smile like that?”

“Eh? What are you talking about?”

“Just thinking aloud Lancelot. This was a foolish errand, let’s go back.”

Chapter 21

Their thoughts

Arnold was evaluated highly by others.

His grades were always the best. Even though his magic prowess was not up to that standard, it still placed in the elite category and, as if to compensate for that slight flaw, he was also blessed with a talent in swordsmanship. Being able to incorporate magic into his bladework with the [Blazing Sword] skill put him at the top among his age within the kingdom.

On top of that, he was already displaying the majesty befitting a future king and there was a growing anticipation that his name would most likely be etched into the pages of history.

This made him a capture target that was way above the rest. Although obviously, just like every other living being, he was not perfect. The Crown Prince did have a flaw as well.

Or rather, it would be more accurate to call it a complex rather than a flaw. It was something similar to what Vincent suffered from before.

An anger at people around him that only bothered to see him through a narrow lens of “excellent crown prince”.

Arnold had earnestly worked hard to become a fitting candidate to be the next monarch ever since he was a child. Although those labors brought fruit, he was convinced no one recognized the effort he was making.

Everyone only praised his excellence while saying that this much was expected from the next king. Every time he was praised like this, Arnold thought he did not excel because of who he was, he excelled because he worked hard for it. Although that was a peevish person’s way of thinking, it could be explained by the heavy pressure his role placed on his shoulders.

As the praise and stress continued to pile up Arnold developed distrust towards

people surrounding him and began to treat them coldly without restraint.

But everyone simply took that attitude as dignified and, ironically, raised their evaluation of him even more which caused Arnold's disgruntlement to grow.

Like Vincent, he was convinced people were praising the heir to the throne, not the person behind that title. Then, one day, an exception appeared. That was Maria.

Until that time, the only person who saw and treated him as someone to compete with was Lancelot. Lancelot's age, social status, and abilities made him a worthy rival of the prince. With the two of them recognizing that fact, they acknowledged the fact by addressing each other informally. But even Lancelot did not show frustration whenever he lost at something, but rather complemented Arnold saying that the result was as expected of him.

Maria was different. Boldly declaring that she will never lose, she constantly and earnestly challenged him aiming to win. Her arrival made Arnold understand that Lancelot didn't, and wouldn't ever, face him seriously as a competitor which made him feel a bit down.

However, the pleasure from the arrival of a true rival, Maria, still overshadowed that sadness. He found competing with Maria every day enjoyable and that made the gloomy feelings fade away little by little.

The intensity of anger and rejection aimed at people around him was slowly channeled into a different direction. He also realized that his own prejudice warped the way he was looking at others. He finally grew aware of the childishness inside of him as well as the selfish fixation on how people treated him. It made him angry at himself. It also made him remember the lone girl that he might have hurt as a result.

His fiancée, Ariel Woodville Windhill.

He first met Ariel before their engagement ceremony, during the introductory meeting arranged because it was known at that point they would end up married. She made the worst possible impression on him. Even though it was their first meeting, she was too meddlesome and trying too hard to look good in other people's eyes. And on top of it all, she was already acting like a queen even though they weren't even engaged yet.

But the absolute worst thing was the tired expression she let slip in a single,

unguarded, moment. It got him to realize immediately that everything she had shown on that day was merely a facade.

In that moment, Arnold identified Ariel as someone he could never accept and with that, he never met her again.

It was clear that Ariel was aware of his rejection, because even when she entered the Academy, she showed herself as little as allowed to a fiancée observing the bare minimum of etiquette and didn't seem to concern herself with him anymore. Although there were times that they conversed, all she seemed to try to do in those situations was to irritate him even more.

Back then he thought it irrelevant. She might have grown beautifully since the last time he saw her, but her bearing was exactly like that of a high aristocrat. So just as he expected, that really made her a someone he would never accept.

However, now Arnold thought that he was wrong. It might be the contrast between the attitude she shows him and the people around her. The realization that Ariel, like him, might be playing a role too, one of a wife candidate capable of standing up to her husband.

And then there was that moment. When Arnold saw the shining, unguarded smile of Ariel without her masks.

A moment that planted a thought in Arnold's mind. That he wanted that smile to be directed towards him. That those kinds of smiles should be pointed at him, her fiancé.



Although from Rion's perspective Maria's conquests looked to be proceeding smoothly, in reality, that was not the case causing her to grow increasingly impatient.

The main cause of that was the Crown Prince Arnold. By following the capturing guide, she was able to close the distance to him. And although she really did feel that was the case, for some reason there was a line that she was never able to cross. That was not referring to the intimacy of the relationship, but rather the essential prerequisite for making Arnold's cancellation of his betrothal with Ariel a reality. For the plot to start heading in that direction, Arnold must voice the desire of breaking off the engagement on his own.

After hearing that from him, Maria was then supposed to reveal all the chastisements and harassment she received and the possibility of Ariel being the culprit behind it all. Once that happened, Arnold with the cooperation of their group would start looking for a sufficient evidence of her involvement.

That was how the story was supposed to develop, but Arnold was yet to speak about the cancellation of marriage at all. Without that, Maria was not able to reveal the chastisements. Doing that prematurely would lead to Ariel being strictly rebuked and stopping of further harassment, however, it would not end with the cancellation of prince's betrothal.

Tattling was not something that protagonist was supposed to do. She was supposed to reveal everything due to not wanting Arnold to marry a woman like Ariel. The game setting was strangely fixated on this.

(I guess I should make that woman's bad side be displayed more.)

Maria knew why the matter of Arnold's betrothal wouldn't develop in her desired direction. For some reason, Ariel didn't seem to want to go anywhere near Arnold at all.

There should've been numerous scenes where Ariel was clinging to the prince too much causing his displeasure but, in this world, the two seldom meet and even when they did, they only exchanged the shallowest of greetings.

Like this, they wouldn't start to get along but their relationship wouldn't get worse either. That was not something Maria wanted.

(Did I fail? Did the plot derail because I indulged in chasing the hidden character?.)

Maria assumed Rion was the reason why the whole situation devolved into this mess. Not because she realized what Rion actually is, though. She was suspicious of the relationship between him and Ariel.

She investigated Rion, as he was a capture target, and she didn't believe that the relationship of the two was a mere master-servant one. Even without detailed detective work, just by listening to the conversations between the two anyone would arrive at that conclusion.

Of course, nobody could guess that the two we're just that thick-headed and fail to

recognize their feelings for each other. The nobles discounted those obvious signs, blinded by the assumption that something like love would never happen between an aristocrat and her valet.

Commoners that happened to interact with them were not so oblivious. But they, knowing that such a thing was forbidden, would keep their mouths sealed.

Not that Maria cared about any of that.

What was occupying her mind was the question whether the love that came to fruition between the two, was caused by her.

From Maria's perspective, even amongst the rare characters, Rion might be the one with the highest grade of difficulty. And because of that, it would be natural for a rival character to appear. She was thinking that it might be Ariel.

Although Ariel was supposed to be the rival character for Arnold's route, Maria suspected that this might have changed to Rion's route when she set her sight on him as a capture target. Of course, this was just Maria's own speculation.

However, having the world's protagonist think like that, was bound to bring Rion misfortune.

(In other words, capturing Rion and Arnold at the same time is impossible, huh?)

All Maria's assumptions led to this conclusion. And arriving at such a conclusion prompted Maria to make a choice.

(As expected of rare characters. I still kinda want to conquer him, but all this screams failure. And since I don't get to replay from the start...)

Maria chose Arnold. What was waiting at the end of that conquest was guaranteed queen's crown. Of all the possibilities, that was still the best prize.

Maria didn't believe that she would return to her world when the game completed. That being the case, she wouldn't recklessly choose Rion, a completely unknown route with uncertain rewards.

(I don't think the plot will completely go back to how it was supposed to go... But to get what I need... Yeah, I do feel sorry, but he needs to disappear... And there's a perfect

event coming.)

The method Maria arrived at, in order to make Ariel return as the rival character for Arnold, was to lose Rion as a capture target. The only way to do that was to erase Rion, a hidden character, from the story.

Although she said that she felt sorry for him, Maria didn't really feel a shred of guilt. After all, he was just a game character.



Not everyone in Maria's circle viewed her in good light. There was at least one person harboring outright antipathy.

It was Charlotte Lanchester of House Fatillas.

The reason she was not publicly complaining about Maria was because she was observing and waiting for Arnold's reaction. And because the Crown Prince was not doing anything, the antipathy only grew.

She vented that irritation at Lancelot who was trying to pull Maria towards himself.

"Honestly, what are you trying to achieve with this?"

"With what?"

"Maria."

"I don't understand. Did she do something?"

"Do something.....? Are you really fine with recent developments? She's only getting closer to Arnold now, you know?"

There was no way for Charlotte to know, not that she would care for the reasons, that Maria's current vigor was all due to her impatience with the prolonging conquest. She was simply displeased with the outcome.

"There's nothing that can be done. Arnold is a good man, both in looks and disposition. Even I can see that."

“Do you not favor Maria?”

Lancelot’s response was outside of Charlotte’s expectations.

“I do. But only a petty person would strike against his love rivals.”

“Does this mean that you will be fine if she ends up with somebody else.?”

“It would be troubling, but I do not believe it possible.”

“Oh?”

Charlotte didn’t understand why Lancelot was so confident. Not just that. If she was to be asked, Maria was a lascivious woman who would use any and all means to attract men. Of course, as an aristocrat, she would never put such shameless thoughts into her mouth.

Neither could she figure out why Maria was allowed to do as she pleased and why did all those men fawn over her.

“Simple, really. Arnold is the Crown Prince, Maria does not belong next to him.”

“True.”

“And all the other guys? Compared to me, they are nothing. So in the end, she’s bound to choose me.”

“...I see.”

Lancelot was an idiot, Charlotte figured that out during her first meeting. Other people were not aware of that was because he was always next to Arnold. And that comparison would humble anyone.

“I was the one who made her who she is. She is always thanking me, saying that I am the reason why she is where she is at today.”

Charlotte thought this just made him a convenient stepping stone that Maria merely used to be able to enter the circle of aristocrats. In order to get closer to the Crown Prince Arnold.

“Gratitude and romantic feelings are two different things, you know.”

“...Charlotte, what is your problem exactly? It’s not like it matters to you what happens to our relationship, does it?”

Indeed, the relationship between Maria and Lancelot was not a concern of Charlotte. What she wanted was that someone, no matter who it was, tied Maria down, so she didn’t intrude in their circle any longer.

“Are you aware that many people look at her actions unfavorably?”

Charlotte was too indirect, her question brought unexpected result.

“Yes, I did hear the dark rumors.”

“Eh?”

“All this is the work of that little, impertinent Windhill witch, isn’t it?”

“...Ariel.”

“Ariel. She’s so unhappy about Maria getting close to Arnold that she’s stirring trouble in the background.”

“She is his fiancée after all. Did you expect any different?”

“Charlotte, are you trying to defend that woman?”

“Rather than defending her, I find it strange that prince Arnold appears to be close to other women while being engaged.”

“That’s... Hard to argue against, but... These kinds of malicious tactics that woman employs, they just don’t sit well with me.”

“I am of the same opinion.”

“That little girl doesn’t fit Arnold at all. I want to expose her misdeeds and somehow put the betrothal of Ariel and Arnold to an end.”

“You want to cancel their engagement?”

Charlotte was surprised that Lancelot would go as far as this. This was interfering with the betrothal of the crown prince. That meant meddling with serious politics and country governance. Even if he was an heir of a marquess house, this was not something a student should poke his fingers into.

“Isn’t that obvious? Since she is marrying Arnold, she would be our queen. Like hell, I would let someone who commits misdeeds in the shadows take the crown.”

“That’s right... You’re correct. However, can you really achieve that?”

“If her malicious deeds become publicly known, even his majesty, the King, can’t ignore that. It would be a problem to have a queen that’s scorned by all nobility.”

“Indeed...”

“But for that, we must obtain evidence first. I can roughly see the outline of the matter, but concrete proof eludes my grasp. Won’t Charlotte cooperate with me in this? You are a lady, there are pieces of information that only you can get.”

“...So be it. I will lend you a hand.”

“I’m counting on you.”

This world was harsh on antagonists. Even if they were innocent, it would try to persecute them if that was their role.

On the other hand, the world was gentle to protagonists. Even if they committed misdeeds on the way to their goal, they would be protected by it. This was that kind of world.

And Rion was trying to oppose it, no matter how reckless it might seem.

Chapter 22

The Devil Stirs (First Half)

“How did it come to this?”

It was too late for these words already. The events developed at a breakneck pace and Rion was currently escorting Ariel to an abandoned castle not far from the capital.

They were in the company of the Crown Prince Arnold, Lancelot, Charlotte and Maria. Each of them, including Ariel, had knights escorting them.

It was a lineup that Rion wouldn't ever want to travel with. The truth is, he initially came to Vincent in order to recommend refusing the invitation.

The rumor said that the abandoned fortification was occupied by inhuman beings. The protagonist's group came to investigate the actual place in order to find out the truth. This was the opening act for the impending attack of the Devil. A first game event from that chain.

Rion didn't have sufficient knowledge of the setting to know that. However, since the Crown Prince, three members of marquess houses and the protagonist Maria were all participating, he knew this could be no ordinary matter. Furthermore, the whole thing was too unnatural.

There was no reason in existence that could excuse allowing this group to go to a possibly very dangerous place regardless of the number of knights escorting them.

This far too convenient situation was without a doubt, one of the events.

Rion failed to realize that with this being the case, having Vincent refuse will cause the plot to involve Ariel instead. Furthermore, the world's intervention took the form of a direct invitation from the Crown Prince himself.

When Rion came to Ariel to talk about it, it was already too late. She would never refuse a personal invitation from Arnold. No matter how she felt about the idea, she would follow the will of her fiancé. That was Ariel's way of doing things.

When he heard about the immediate reply, Rion fell onto his knees in despair. Ariel looked unmoved by that reaction and simply told him the schedule of their departure.

It was obvious that Rion would go too, there was no way he would let her travel to such a dangerous place on her own.

And that was what led to the current situation.

Two knights were leading the group with lit torches, both of them belonged to the royal guard. Behind them, the marching order was Arnold and Ariel followed by Lancelot and Maria and finally Charlotte. Other knights in the marquess' employ were guarding the flanks.

Rion and other servants were furthest in the back following the nobles. From his position, it did indeed seem that the group was taking every precaution.

His feelings were rather complex. This was an event involving the protagonist. So even though it might be really dangerous, it should not be life-threatening for the crucial characters. Which, of course, included Ariel.

This conclusion cheered him up. But if that was the case, then it meant that the game's plot was progressing unimpeded. Which meant his efforts had no impact so far. And that made him feel down. Rion, with his limited knowledge of the game setting, couldn't know that this was not true at all.

To be honest, he was busying himself with profound thoughts in order to not have to look at people in front of him.

The Crown Prince chose to travel with Ariel beside him. Hearing that, everyone, including Rion, was surprised. They even seemed unaware of the fact that she joined the group at Arnold's personal invitation. Rion couldn't guess the goal behind the actions of the prince.

Although that put him on guard and he was constantly watching for anything untoward, currently there were no signs of ill intent. On the contrary, although his efforts were a bit awkward, Arnold was one way or another trying to have a conversation with Ariel.

That was making Rion suspicious but happy at the same time. And somehow, a little bit sad.

(Stop it!)

He hurriedly shook off the strange feelings in his heart.

“Hmm? What are you doing?”

The one who asked was Charlotte walking not far in front of him.

“Milady?”

“Your arms started to shake all of a sudden. Is there anything wrong?”

It seems he didn't just shake away the thoughts inside his head but also unconsciously moved his hands as well.

“Ehm... A web. There was a spider web, milady.”

“A spider web?”

“Yes. It appeared suddenly in front of me so I got surprised and brushed it off awkwardly.”

“I see...”

“There's no reason to worry milady. Please do not mind me and go ahead.”

“...Ah, but you see, there is a problem.”

“...A... Problem?”

“I ended up with no conversation partner and have nothing else to do right now.”

“...Oh, I see. My sympathies milady, that is unfortunate indeed.”

Although Arnold with Ariel and Lancelot with Maria were holding a conversation as they walked, Charlotte had no one beside her.

“But, thankfully, I seem to have stumbled on a solution to my predicament.”

“...Ah? And what would that be if milady doesn't mind me asking?”

“You.”

“...Me?”

“Yes, you. Walk with me please.”

“...But why?”

“Goodness! Stop being so wary! Am I this off-putting!?”

The angry voice of Charlotte resounded within the abandoned castle. People in front of her, surprised by that, all turned their heads to look at the source of the commotion. And all those stares ended up questioning Rion.

“...My deepest apologies to all the lords and ladies. Everything is fine, please do carry on with the investigation.”

The last bit was aimed at Ariel who was looking at him suspiciously from the midst of the group. Although she was seemingly about to say something, Arnold urged her to keep on moving forward.

“...I seem to have caused a commotion. Do accept my apologies.”

“How can I, milady, when this is entirely my fault for thoughtlessly making you angry? I should have made it clear from the start that it was awareness of my own inadequacies making me hesitate to join Charlotte-sama in conversation, not something Charlotte-sama did.”

“You should stop overthinking things. We have never engaged in dialogue before and I chose you exactly because I hoped conversation with you to be uniquely different.”

“Is that so... I’m unsure whether I can live up to such high expectations, but when milady frames it this way, I can refuse no longer.”

“Excellent. Join me at my side then. Even if you were to be utterly dull, it’s even more boorish to just walk alone in silence.”

“As you wish, Lady Charlotte.”

Just like that, Rion had started a conversation with Charlotte but recently he was

somewhat not his usual self.

When Ariel was chatting with the commoners in the cafeteria, her conversation partner changed many times. Whenever that happened, it was Rion's job to put those students, nervously stiff in front of Ariel, back at ease.

Due to that, during those numerous conversations, there were times where he had to improvise funny anecdotes to lighten the mood. Those were mostly based on stories about Vincent when he was still a child.

Thanks to that, he was able to raise Vincent's reputation and change his goal to increase other students' familiarity of his lord.

He was now retelling those stories to Charlotte. Incidentally, he thought she was, in a way, strikingly similar to Vincent.

"W-Wait a b-bit... My... Stomach..... I heard the rumors, but... Isn't this too much?"

Hearing those anecdotes made Charlotte hold her stomach to try to suppress her laughter.

"Err... I admit this reaction is more than I expected... Did I perhaps do something improper right now?"

Rion asked with a dead serious face.

"A-After all that... You..... Goodness, this is too funny, I can barely hold myself..."

Seeing that reaction of Rion, Charlotte burst out with laughter. With no care about what others might think, she nearly bent in half laughing while supported by Rion's shoulder.

"Erm..."

"S-Sorry... W-Wait a b-bit... I'll get myself together soon..."

It seemed that Charlotte's wish for an interesting company was fulfilled by him more than enough. Although he was satisfied with that, he could feel the piercing glares of Ariel stabbing him every time more laughter was heard.

“ For heaven’s sake! Would you two stop that already! Just where do you think we are!?”

Putting on hold the conversation he was having with Maria, Lancelot complained loudly. The actual reason he did so was because his conversation with Maria was getting interrupted with the girl increasingly curious about the obviously funny stories Rion was telling to Charlotte.

“You are absolutely correct lord Lancelot and I beg your forgiveness. Lady Charlotte, isn’t it time...”

“Another moment, please. Let me calm myself down a little bit more.”

“I’m afraid that our time is running out rapidly. The situation doesn’t seem to have any more room for left for levity.”

“Eh?”

Immediately realizing the meaning behind Rion’s words, Charlotte clamped down on her mirth. Her expression changed and she started trying to probe for unseen presences in her surroundings. Charlotte wasn’t the only one who did so. Even Lancelot, who was complaining just now, began to pay attention.

“They are close, are they not? I wonder why can’t we see them.”

Charlotte muttered talking to herself.

“I fear that they are most likely under our feet”

Rion answered her nonetheless.

“.....!?”

The surprised voice of Charlotte was drowned out by a loud crashing sound. They were engulfed by a quickly thickening cloud of dust. With their vision obstructed, they could just guess what was happening.

“This way please!”

Having her hand strongly pulled as she heard the shout, Charlotte followed obediently

knowing that it was Rion. She had gotten familiar with that voice by now.

“What is happening!? Where are the enemies!?”

Lancelot was also confused by the situation. It was clear they were under attack and everyone, like Charlotte, could sense the presence of the enemy. Since the foe still couldn't be seen, but clearly closed the distance they had to be directly below their feet.

“Are they below the ground?!”

“It is likely! They collapsed the exit, attack should come from the rear.”

Rion's voice was heard by everyone and they all shared his thoughts. From somewhere close Arnold could be heard shouting orders.

“Enemy is below and behind us! Form up!”

“Yes sire!”

As the cloud of dust started to clear the knights could be seen following Arnold's instructions. As Charlotte was confirming the situation, she suddenly felt the sensation of Rion's hands holding her vanish.

As soon as some visibility returned he let go of her and immediately moved to Ariel's side.

“Milady, are you alright?”

“I am fine. You seem to be unhurt too.”

“Somehow. I'm afraid though that other servants walking behind me...”

“I understand.”

All the non-combatants walking behind Charlotte and Rion were most likely buried by the debris from the collapse. And even if someone survived that, they would be faced with...

“What on earth... Are those...? “

Lancelot asked with a shaking voice. He couldn't be really helped, the clearing cloud of dust revealed a grotesque looking crowd. Those beings were neither human nor like a demonic beast, it was a kind of foe that the people of this age had never seen before.

"So the rumors were technically true, huh? These things really are human no longer."

In clear contrast to shaken Lancelot, Arnold looked and sounded completely calm.

"Your highness, please withdraw."

Said one of the royal guards in front of the Crown Prince Arnold, without turning his eyes away from the enemy.

"I will fight."

"Highness, this enemy is unknown. Fighting here and now is reckless. Something only a fool would attempt."

"I..."

The reason behind the royal guard's sharp words was clear, he wanted Arnold to lose his will to fight. If something happened to the Crown Prince, the guards would be punished heavily even posthumously if they did not survive. Their top priority was the safety of Arnold. Their own lives ranked far behind.

All the other knights attached to the group were in the same position. If they failed to protect their charges, death and infamy awaited them. That's why all of them moved in front of the young nobles in order to shield them from harm.

"Arnold-sama, let us retreat."

"What?"

The first person to agree with the words of those knights was Maria.

"There is no need to spend our strength fighting here, we should withdraw and regroup."

"Assume I agree, where do we go? The exit is blocked."

“All castles have more than one gate, there must be another way out.”

“You’re right.”

“Let’s hurry then. The longer we hesitate, the bigger the burden on the knights.”

“You...”

Maria’s words betrayed her assumption that their escorts are going to be left behind. Arnold, noticing that immediately, looked at Maria as if he couldn’t believe that she said that.

His surprise was natural. Right now Maria was trying to do the same thing she was so harshly rebuking Vincent for during the excursion.

“We need to go now.”

She grabbed the hand of hesitating Arnold and tried to lead him away but he shook her off immediately.

“Arnold-sama?”

“...”

She wasn’t wrong. He knew he should treasure his life more than anything. If this was a war, it would be lost the moment he fell. However, even if his reason was telling him to go, his heart wouldn’t let him leave.

Arnold was paralyzed with indecision.

“Please be careful milady.”

“...I shall, but you take care too.”

A little bit away from the hesitating Arnold, Rion was talking with Ariel. Everyone would immediately understand the meaning behind their words just by listening.

“Rion”

“Milady?”

“Kneel down.”

“Is this really the time...”

“No arguments!”

“At once.”

Although the walking pace of those hostile beings was slow, they were about to close in on them. Nevertheless, Rion knelt as he was told and was looking at Ariel expectantly.

Ariel put his face between her hands and got closer as if trying to look into the deepest parts of Rion’s eyes.

“...You are forbidden to die. Do you understand?”

“Your wish is my command, Lady Windhill. I shall not die.”

“No matter what happens, you are to come back to me.”

“I hear and I shall comply. Expect me back at your side.”

“Rion... I... Will put my faith in you.”

She forcibly altered the last words. The things she really wanted to say couldn’t be said in this situation.

“Those words will be my strength. My lady, it is time.”

“Yes.”

Rion slowly stood up and turning his back on Ariel drew his sword. Vincent lent him that sword, one with the crest of the House Windhill, exactly for moments like this.

“I’ll be heading off!”

Right after saying that, Rion charged forward. Without a shred of hesitation, he plunged himself into the crowd of enemies. Ariel followed his charge with a spell.

“Hah!?”

Arnold who saw that inadvertently let out a cry of surprise. At first, it looked to him as if Ariel was trying to attack Rion. However, her magic flowed around him and assaulted the enemy in front. Simultaneously, Rion also cut down another target with a single stroke.

Rion’s movement never stopped. He struck at the swarming hostiles around him one after another and whenever he swung his big sword Ariel’s magic immediately followed to support him.

“Amazing.....”

He unconsciously voiced his admiration. It was aimed neither at Rion’s swordsmanship nor Ariel’s spells. What impressed him was their cooperation, so splendid, that one would struggle to imitate it.

“Your highness! Arnold! We should withdraw at once!”

The one who said these words was Ariel.

“But why?”

The Crown Prince couldn’t understand it at all. Just how was she able to abandon Rion in such a place. Just looking at their relationship before... It was obvious that it had already transcended that of a master and servant.

“Hurry, please! Don’t let Rion’s effort go to waste!”

“But...”

“Your highness, please go! Hurry!”

The knights, who were astonished by Rion and Ariel’s way of fighting, were brought back to reality by her voice. So was Maria.

“Arnold-sama, we really need to go now.”

This time she was tightly gripping Arnold’s hands and she pulled him along. Lancelot and Charlotte followed suit. With Rion and the knights left behind, the nobles escaped

from the scene.

“None of them seem to be particularly strong, but the sheer number of them... That might be tricky. “

Rion, having confirmed that Ariel and the others were gone, immediately re-engaged the crowd. The knights were lined up beside him blocking the pathway.

“If it’s just numbers, we’ll manage.”

The knights managed to get a good grasp of the enemy strength by now. Actually, none of them were even wounded yet.

“I suppose, if things stay as they are.”

“...You expect more of them to come?”

“The things in front of you are called undead. They are corpses forced back into a twisted mockery of life by foul magic. According to my knowledge, they should be controlled by someone or something.”

“I see.”

“And if there is someone like that here...”

“Then what?”

“Then, I’m afraid, they will rise again. They were, after all, dead from the start.”

As if just waiting for Rion’s explanation to finish, the defeated undead all around the passageway stood up one after another. Unfortunately, his prediction was splendidly on the mark.

“You’ve got to be kidding me...”

“There’s no time to be surprised. Second round starts now, let’s give it our all.”

Although Rion said this was the start of the second round, it was clear now that things wouldn’t end with just that. The knights, not knowing how many more times could the undead come back, resumed their hopeless battle.

Chapter 23

The Devil Stirs (Second Half)

If an engagement was just a question of numbers, the knights could deal with that.

However, that was only true in absence of other factors. The undead would rise again and again no matter how many times the knights defeated them. There was no way for them to win against an enemy like that.

It didn't help that before they knew it, the corpses were now coming from behind them as well. With the undead crawling up from under the ground they had expected this but sometimes just knowing something doesn't help.

Rion and the knights were now completely surrounded. They were still able to keep the enemy at bay, but they were about to reach their limits. Some of the knights got to that point already, their movements grew dull and thus they were unable to prevent themselves being pulled into the undead crowd.

“Gyaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!”

They heard a scream one would never think a human was capable of. They felt queasy just from imagining what was happening to the companions inside the mob.

A moment later. There were figures clad in armor that could be seen within the crowd of enemies, the knights killed by the undead turned and became one of them.

“J-Jason... No way...”

One of the knights muttered in a shaking voice. The name must have belonged to a dead companion that was raised against them.

They might've been close before, but this was hardly the time for sentiments.

This was what Rion thought to himself without voicing it out loud. Which was unfortunate as the knights could have used a reminder of the fact.

Seeing their allies turned into undead made the knights lose composure and that caused the situation on the battlefield to worsen. The knights, who hesitated to cut down their former allies that had turned undead, were mercilessly slaughtered.

Each time one of them fell, the number of the raised knight increased. Faced with the prospect of becoming one of them, the ones still alive started to lose their sanity. Unable to cope with the fear they went berserk and recklessly charged ahead.

Obviously, that only made the amount of undead grow even more.

“This is hopeless...”

The few surviving knights muttered despondently.

“Such a detestable way of fighting. Someone that resorts to battles like those must be not only repugnant but a huge coward too.”

In contrast to them, Rion was speaking as if making fun of someone.

“You sure are carefree, aren’t you?”

Asked a knight who still had his mind sufficiently intact to ask a proper question. His armor, slightly more ornate than the rest of the troop, indicated that he was the one in charge of them all, but that was not something Rion was aware of.

“Carefree...? I guess, I wasn’t really pressed so far.”

“How did you get to have such an impressive endurance?”

“A lot of harsh training.”

“Heh, admirable, but there’s no telling when you reach your limit.”

“Can’t disagree.”

Although Rion said that in jest in order to put the knight’s feelings at ease, the man seemed to take this seriously. Rion was convinced that everyone was about to run out of steam.

“Even if we’re all aware of that, we still lack the means to destroy them permanently.”

“That’s because our enemy is a coward! A so-called devil that fears human knights so much that he has to hide in a small corner while the fight takes place!”

“Are you alright? What are you saying?”

The knight was bewildered by Rion’s sudden shout.

“Just offering a coward some well-deserved ridicule! I know you can hear me you craven little fiend!”

“What is this all...”

Rion only ignored the knight and focused his gaze at one point. It looked like his target finally made its appearance.

“There it is.”

“...What’s that!? Is that a human?”

Following Rion’s line of sight, the knights noticed a new silhouette and inadvertently raised their voices. The new arrival was clad in a jet black robe and looked surprisingly humanlike.

However, it was not a human. The being that just revealed itself was the one Rion has been looking forward to finding. It was a devil controlling the undead in the castle.

“Oh, look! The coward is here!”

Even though the real enemy had finally shown itself, Rion continued his verbal assault.

“...So cocky for a kid.”

“It even speaks!”

“Such cheap provocations. Do you really think anyone would fall for petty tricks like these?”

“Well, you say that, but you did show up in the end.”

“...I came with full knowledge of your aims. Only despair awaits you and my presence

here will make it so much more delicious and so much more crushing.”

“I don’t care for your reasons, you appearing is all that matters.”

“Really now?”

“Defeating you will make all this end.”

“And you consider yourself capable of that, child?”

Rion didn’t consider the problem. Failing would mean breaking his promise to Ariel, therefore he must defeat the enemy at all cost. Regardless of the method.

“I don’t need to be capable! Look at those valiant knights! Once they reach and kill you, they’ll break your hold on the dead and the ordeal will be over!”

“What!?”

“Now is the time! The true enemy has shown himself! Make use of this chance!”

This was a provocation too. However, this time it was not aimed at the devil but at the knights who were fighting alongside Rion. They fell for it splendidly and charged through the crowd of undead in order to try and defeat the mastermind. Even though in the back of their minds, they knew it would be futile, they could not resist the temptation of the chance to end their desperate battle.

“Foolish humans! Come and fall before my puppets!”

The devil did not even worry for a second about the possibility of the knights breaking through. If they were really capable of such a thing, the knights would’ve been able to break their encirclement and escape already.

But it did make one miscalculation. It was oblivious to the fact that, excluding the two people most important to him, Rion never cared about the life of others. As such he was ready and willing to use them ruthlessly if it led to fulfilling promises made to those dear to him.

“What!?”

The devil exclaimed in surprise.

Suddenly, the undead mob was smothered by flames and utterly demolished. The fire didn't stop there, racing towards the devil, turning everything that stood in its path to ash.

Now that the knights were dead, Rion had no one to hide his strength from. He could now use all his abilities in order to emerge victorious.

"So you can conjure fire!? Bastard!"

"Did I ever say I can't?"

"Don't get cocky with just that!"

The devil was clearly shaken and Rion knew the reason for that. When one thought about undead, the weakness that came to mind were fire, light or holy attribute magic if such existed. His enemy's unease allowed Rion to confirm that this was indeed true in this case too.

Whether the controller shared the weaknesses of his puppets was still an open question. But that was only a matter of testing things.

The magical flame summoned by Rion transformed into numerous small dragons circling his opponent.

"Presumptuous!"

Judging by the disdain in its words the devil clearly had countermeasures available. And just as if to confirm this, multiple blades of water formed on its fingertips. Water for the fire, the response was indeed splendid.

The water blades moved to attack the flames surrounding the devil, but...

"Like I'd let you!"

"Impossible!"

...They were all intercepted by water balls conjured by Rion. This caused Rion's enemy to blunder by losing its composure.

The boy took his chance and struck, beheading his foe with his sword.

“Damn bastard...”

The severed head began muttering curses as it rolled on the ground.

Even beheaded, the devil was clearly still alive. Rion was looking at its head with a cold glare.

“...So stupid.”

“How dare you?!”

“If you kept your mouth shut, I might have thought that you were already dead and left this place.”

“So what? I’m an undead, like the Immortal King. Someone like you cannot kill me.”

These words prompted certain memories to surface in Rion’s mind.

“You... You are a lich, aren’t you?”

According to Ryou’s knowledge from his former world, something called an immortal king would usually be a lich – a magic user who turned himself into undead by means of his own craft. But Rion wasn’t able to recall anything more.

“H-How...?”

Spot on. But this guy was rather lame for a lich. Honestly, he was just pathetic.

“Let me think... How did one kill a lich?”

Unfortunately shaking up his opponent was all that Rion’s knowledge was good for. On the ways of killing liches, he drew a blank.

“Screw you.”

“That was a rhetorical question. Now then...”

“Die kid!”

As Rion looked to be lost in thought, a water blade began forming at the hand of the

lich's headless body. But before it even reached Rion's back it's path was blocked by a wall of ice.

"You really are a fool. What smart person would betray his ambush by a shout?"

"Y-You bastard..."

It wasn't like he managed to defend himself because the lich raised its voice. Anticipating surprise attacks, he instructed Diane to assume defensive stance from the start.

He only ridiculed the lich for raising his voice to irritate it some more.

"Hmm, I guess if I don't know what exactly can kill you I should just use everything. Sarah, Diane, it's all yours!"

The severed head of the lich was pierced by Rion's sword and then engulfed by Sarah's flame. In the meantime, multiple blades of water fragmented its body.

"Naive! I will neve..."

Those were the last words of the monstrosity. The fire consumed its head completely and nothing remained on the ground where it had fallen.

"...never die just from that? Maybe. But you still showed up too early and that's why you lost."

Rion said this even though there was nobody left to hear his words. He assumed the reason he was able to win was because the enemy was a tutorial boss. An existence that would never be a threat to the protagonist, just a stepping stone for her to gain experience.

But in reality, he was misunderstanding things. This event was not what he thought it would be.

The encounter in the castle was supposed to result in the defeat of the protagonist's party in order to make them determined to grow stronger. Not an uncommon plot device.

In the game, when fighting the lich, the heroine's group would be unable to save even

a single life and would end up mourning their powerlessness. Due to that, they would resolve to get stronger as to not let such a thing happen ever again.

This was an event that Rion shouldn't be able to survive.



In the meantime, the protagonist's party...

Arnold and the others were able to find a different escape route and exit the abandoned castle. They didn't manage to leave unimpeded though and had to fight numerous groups of undead along the way.

While fleeing, Arnold was able to sense that all the knights had perished.

His body could be seen quivering in frustration as they moved towards the rear castle gate on the way to rejoin the expedition members left to watch over the carriages.

Once they got there, a dispute erupted. Ariel wanted to wait until Rion came back, Lancelot argued for immediate return to the royal capital so proper authorities can be informed and a punitive force dispatched.

The nobles voted and with four votes to one the decision went against Ariel. Frustrated she tried to stay anyway, but was ordered by Arnold to evacuate as well.

Their carriage left straight for the capital. The horses were constantly whipped to go faster even though they would soon need to rest anyway regardless how fast the group wanted to reach their destination. This made the haste meaningless, but it gave them an excuse to get away from the castle as fast and as far as possible.

That situation inside the carriage, while their emotions could hardly be called positive, made for a very cold atmosphere with no member of the party able to say anything.

At the center of that cold air was Ariel, with a face like a Noh mask and stiff, deathly still body. It made everyone else think that, inside her, her rage had mixed with the fear of losing Rion and turned unimaginably intense.

[TL Note: A noh mask is a wood-carved, hand-painted, somewhat life-like mask.]

The spirits that were in resonance with Ariel's feelings ran amok within the carriage

which was why the air felt so cold. But even without that, she was simply emitting an aura that could freeze one's heart solid.

"...Ariel."

The only one who was able to call out to her in that situation was Arnold, a man of true courage. One possibly urged by his sense of responsibility as Ariel's fiancé.

However, his courage was left unanswered. But even so, Arnold began to weave words.

"...The fault is mine. If only I was stronger."

It was unknown whether these words of Arnold were brought by the game plot or did they arise from his heart.

However, there was a person who took it as a sign of scenario progression.

"The fault does not lie with Arnold-sama alone. I too bear responsibility for this."

That was Maria, who instantly followed up on his words. After she said that the ambiance within the carriage immediately changed.

"That's right. I am also responsible. I was unable to do anything."

Lancelot also spoke his own thoughts.

"Of course, this is true for me too."

Charlotte followed up.

With all of them brooding on their own powerlessness...

"Let's become stronger. So strong that we won't lose anyone precious ever again."

The protagonist resolves herself to get stronger.

"Maria is right. We have to grow stronger. So that the lives of those who let us escape won't be sacrificed in vain."

Lancelot's response followed what Maria remembered from the game.

“Correct. We have that responsibility after all.”

So was Charlotte’s. It was not in her character to behave differently here.

“Arnold?”

“Arnold-sama.”

Now both Maria and Lancelot were urging Arnold to follow suit.

“...I know, I understand. I will get stronger. Strong enough to make sure that no one by my side has to face despair ever again.”

Arnold’s words seemingly went out to meet their expectations. It had always been like this for these four.

However, this time not everything was like in the cutscenes. The prince’s gaze was fixated on Ariel and never wavered. His resolve was not an answer to theirs but a vow to his fiancé.

“Everyone, let’s do our best! We are all—-!”

Maria was not able to continue her words to the end. A strong gust of wind hit her face interrupting her mid-sentence.

It was different from Ariel’s cold aura and originated at the door of the carriage that should’ve been shut during the journey.

“Ariel!”

The voice of Arnold reverberated in the small space.

Before they knew it, she was already standing in the open doorway ignoring Arnold completely. Her body was visibly shining with delight.

“Ariel!” “Wha!?” “No way!!”

Her unexpected action caused Arnold and the others to exclaim in surprise.

“EH!!?”

But what surprised them even more, was the sight of Rion who was trying to catch up with the carriage on a horseback.

And then Ariel dived towards her brother's valet.

As expected, unable to deal with so much momentum, Rion was knocked off his mount with the girl in his hands. He hugged Ariel in a way that would prevent her from getting injured as he landed on his back.

"Guah!!"

The tremendous force of impact made him struggle for breath. But having not even tried to cushion the fall and hitting the ground square with his back he could consider himself lucky that he ended up only winded.

"...Do you need healing?"

Ariel, still hugging Rion, looked up to him with upturned eyes.

"...I-I can't brea--"

Normally, Rion's face would've been bright red in a situation like that, but not this time.

"Shall I provide some air to your lips?"

"E-eh? Ah... No... That!"

With her body slightly elevated, Ariel was peeking at Rion's face from above. That unexpectedly caused Rion to blush furiously and thrown his heart into turmoil.

Wind flowed gently around Rion at that moment. It was Ariel's magic.

"Eh?"

Rion suffered from a huge misunderstanding.

"Is this much enough?"

"...Ah yes... I am as new, milady."

“I see. Thank goodness.”

Ariel was really worried before, but now a smile brightened her face.

He was back where he belonged. Looking at her face, he felt that certainty radiate from his soul.

“...Ah, now that my head is clear milady. Can I have a request?”

“What would it be?”

“In the future please refrain from jumping from a speeding carriage onto a running horse.”

“I believed Rion would deal with the trivial hazards involved in that.”

“That’s..... well...”

Absolute trust. That was the relationship forged between them.

Rion kept the promise that he made. Ariel just kept believing in him. That was why she had never felt that leaving him in the castle was synonymous to abandoning him. Rion would be able to survive that situation, Ariel kept believing that.

It was just, as one would expect given those circumstances, that she regretted her own foolishness.

But even so, Rion was able to return. Ariel was unbearably happy just from that.

And for Rion, being able to receive that absolute trust of her made him happy too. He would respond to her trust with even more obstinate fight against her destiny. That was how Rion felt.

The two just kept on smiling and staring at each other.

Seeing them like that made two people scowl.

There was the Crown Prince Arnold. He craved that kind of smile that Ariel was showing Rion. He couldn’t stand seeing it directed at someone other than him.

Then there was Maria. Rion, who should've already died, somehow was able to come back. That, according to her conclusions, meant Rion was an existence impossible to remove from to plot line.

With this Rion had ceased to be a capture target, he now became an enemy that hindered her conquest.

Another event had concluded. Although the story's path changed slightly, the plot was still intact.

Chapter 24

The Crown Prince's Yearning

If there were people tasked with observing Rion, they would probably be surprised by the wide scope and intensity of his activities. A normal person would consider Rion involved in too many things and trying to move forward too many projects at once. Especially given the fact that he was not invoking the influence of his employer even though he was a valet of a major House.

The only reason he was able to accomplish all of his tasks was his extraordinary diligence. He treated all his responsibilities as things to be done at all cost, regardless of their apparent importance, and he would execute them without cutting corners, being the very example of being particular to details.

But with those perfectly performed tasks piling up, his great project finally began to come to fruition.

The reputation of Vincent was improved significantly by now, although not in a way he initially desired to achieve. His lord was now rumored to be a friendly and good-natured heir of a marquess house, an aristocrat putting little weight on the background of those he was dealing with. This, of course, was the result of mingling with commoners and minor nobles.

Ariel's reputation was naturally also great, to the point of being considered outstanding.

Within the game, Ariel had been the archetypical despicable noble lady, not only arrogant but also abusing the authority of her family name. But in this world she was a fascinating dual-natured girl – on one hand, a dignified aristocrat giving off a difficult to approach aura and on the other a charming young woman full of laughter that made others feel intimate.

Furthermore, her grades were excellent. Ariel, gifted with both looks and brains, was the ideal to aspire to for the female students and was admired by the entire student body.

Although the reputation growth was only limited to the students and not terribly important when looked at from the perspective of the Academy, Rion was very happy seeing even such a small result of his actions.

He was changing the course of the world. Such thoughts lifted his spirits but they also made him forget one thing. The protagonist was protected by a plot armor, a force that compelled reality to follow the plot of the story.

The more uncertainty and deviations his actions introduced, the bigger the backlash he was bound to face as the inevitable correction happened.



With the exams over, the results were once again posted in the hallway. The names of the top four were unchanged. Arnold was first, followed by Maria, trailed by Charlotte and Lancelot. The immovable top four, still the same ever since they enrolled.

As this became the norm, those looking for the grades didn't spare it a thought any longer.

"This time... It's still no good?"

Although Maria welcomed her second rank with a disappointed tone of voice, the disappointment couldn't really be seen in her face any longer. The only reason she competed with Arnold in grades was to close the gap between them and now that this already happened, she did not hold the rivalry in much importance anymore.

But even so she was still able to keep her grades up was because she was originally talented anyway. Maria was not like the typical ugly and bullied protagonist in her former life. It was actually the total opposite. She was an active scholar in a famous national university, constantly being invited to the Miss University pageants ever since she was a first-year. Gifted with brains and beauty since birth, an existence admired by everyone.

That had always been the case ever since she was a child. She had been constantly praised as cute or pretty and before long it became normal for her not to feel any satisfaction about it.

For that girl, although with a different name back then, otome games would be the

only, secret, hobby.

An impossible setting with unbelievably high-spec men – she enjoyed worlds where the protagonist was faced with those circumstances. And the more she got hooked by the games the more lacking the real world felt to her. Originally, she was one of those earnest women who would really yearn for her own prince riding a white horse.

To that Maria, fed up with the real world, being reincarnated in this one was really an astonishing development. She really became the protagonist of an otome game just like in her dreams. Maria was really grateful for this reincarnation from the bottom of her heart.

However, the school life arc that she had been waiting for was not progressing according to her will ever since that incident. The characters whose purpose was to make her look better, for some reason, became popular with a portion of the student body. Even worse, the most important capture target, Crown Prince Arnold, rather than falling for her was now even trying to close his distance with her rival.

She clearly knew the cause of all that. It was that irregular, Rion, who survived the event even though he should've not come back alive.

Initially thinking that he was a rare character, she tried to capture him and that resulted in the world affairs deviating from the plot line. Once that became apparent she thought of killing him, but that approach also failed. Maria was now convinced that Rion fully became a major character in the game.

She could only ponder on how to revert the story back to the way she wanted and deal with Rion but currently no good idea came to her mind.

“Please, excuse me.”

“Eh?”

As she was thinking of Rion she heard his voice coming from behind her.

“Just for a quick look to check the results, if possible?”

“O-Oh. I’m sorry, I’m obstructing people by standing here, don’t I?”

“Please do not worry about it, I shall be done momentarily.”

He said as he surveyed the ranking table. His eyes methodically scanning the list from right to left, Rion tilted his head searching for his objective.

“...He was seventh.”

Lancelot said unprompted as if annoyed.

“Eh? Ah! Indeed! Thank you my lord.”

It was at the seventh rank on the leftmost part of the ranking table. The name Vincent Woodville was clearly written over there.

“We did it...”

Tracing the letters of his master’s name at the seventh position, Rion was being overwhelmed by emotions.

After a little pause, he quickly departed.

“To think that Vincent, an apparent failure of an heir, could actually rank seventh. Impressive indeed...”

She put her impression into words as if Rion’s feelings rubbed off on her.

“That’s still just seventh. He is of the marquess rank, it’s a disgrace if he’s not at least fourth. Well, fifth, given that Maria is here too.”

It seemed Lancelot was unwilling to offer any acknowledgment. His level of animosity towards Vincent didn’t show any signs of decreasing.

“Maybe you’re right, but I still am envious a little bit.”

“What is there to envy?”

“That. All that.”

“All what again?”

What Charlotte was looking at was the greatly delighted figure of Vincent that was just informed about his results by Rion.

His joy instantly spread to the surrounding students. After getting to know him in the cafeteria all the commoner students took on themselves to tutor Vincent a bit. Now that they learned the results, they became really vigorous and shared his happiness.

The ripple of jubilation didn't stop there. It started to spread onwards from the group of students hugging each other with Vincent in the center. More and more people gathered after hearing the ruckus the rejoicing students were making and all of them were familiar with Vincent too.

Before long, the young lord was flying up and down in the air. Watching that, the students grew even more delighted. Ariel was also there looking in exhilaration at the spectacle with her brother in the center.

"And there it is again. Why does she keep it from me?"

No one paid any attention to the muttering Crown Prince.



Recently the heart of the Crown Prince wouldn't calm down. He knew why it was. He was displeased by Ariel's attitude.

The way she conversed with Arnold was very decorous, like a perfect noble lady. In his mind, he knew that her behavior was forced by the situation, but his heart didn't agree with that at all. He just felt really irritated.

The obvious solution would be to shorten the distance between them, but presently that path was closed to Arnold.

He wanted to see Ariel's honest and unrestrained smile. He wanted to be a recipient of such a smile. He was convinced that as her fiancé it was his right.

That conviction was just an excuse he constructed for himself. An excuse that was hindering his attempts at getting closer to her, a fact he so far failed to notice.

"That thing... Is it not with us today?"

"Highness?"

"The valet. He's conspicuously absent."

“Oh, Rion. He is with Vincent onii-sama right now. Despite any appearances to the contrary Rion is my older brother’s valet and must attend to his needs.”

“I see...”

Arnold, his feelings running riot, became all the more curious why was there such an intimate relationship between Ariel and that, if this was really the case.

There was no one capable of looking into the depths of Arnold’s heart, but if such a person existed then they would diagnose a severe case of jealousy.

“Leaving that topic aside for now, Highness, are you really fine with coming here?”

The two of them were currently in the favorite pastry shop of Ariel and Vincent, but not one that was House Windhill’s official purveyor. The siblings established a personal relationship with this place and treated it as somewhere they could spend time without having to mind the surroundings.

“It’s fine. I have been searching for a relaxed place just like this one for a while now.”

Ariel took him here because he explicitly requested it but she regretted it immediately.

The disruption caused whenever Arnold headed out could not be compared to Ariel’s visits with Vincent and Rion. Once the Crown Prince decided to grace a shop with his presence all the customers of that shop would be driven out, nobody would be allowed to approach the premises and the area would be secured by numerous royal guards.

Although all the trouble caused to the shop would be covered by generous monetary compensation awarded on top of the price of goods obtained, Ariel still had reasons for regret. Now that the shop could boast of having the Crown Prince as its customer, it would instantly become famous and cease to be a good retreat.

To be honest she found it strange that was still unknown among the aristocrats with a sweet tooth despite the delicious desserts it served. It was a nearly perfect place that catered both to the need for tasty snacks and the need to not be recognized.

(I guess it can’t be helped. I will have Rion search for another one like this.)

Ariel thought from the bottom of her heart.

“Do you come here often?”

“Not as of late, Highness.”

“Why is that?”

“My brother, Rion and I only came here to discuss things in a casual manner. Recently it became possible to do so in the cafeteria, so we began to meet there.”

“Is that so...”

Just from hearing Rion’s name being mentioned, Arnold’s gaze unconsciously turned intense.

“Nevertheless, because I like the desserts served here very much, we still come here sometimes.”

However, Ariel failed to notice that. Despite the rules of etiquette demanding that she looked straight at Arnold’s face, she was always looking at his neck only. She was doing this now too and the prince couldn’t help but get vexed by this politeness.

“Indeed, one can’t argue with delicious things, and desserts here are as good as those made by royal chefs.”

“My, to hear that from your Highness, that’s high praise.”

Having her favorite being praised, Ariel was really happy. As a result, a smile bloomed on her face.

“Ah...”

Although it couldn’t be called the perfect one, the smile that Arnold craved for so long suddenly appeared in front of him. Arnold was taken by surprise and became completely fascinated by what he was seeing.

“...Is there something wrong?”

Puzzled Ariel asked Arnold who suddenly fell silent. That made the prince in his heart deeply lament his failure to keep the smile alive.

“Ah no, just lost in thought.”

Rion in that situation would say, [I was merely fascinated with Ariel-sama’s smile] and make Ariel even happy but the current Crown Prince was not capable of that. No normal, nerve-wracked person would.

“Can I ask one more thing?”

“Of course Highness. As long as it’s something I’m capable of answering.”

“Why do you use the school cafeteria?”

“So I can have a casual conversation with my brother over a meal without having to worry what people around us think. Didn’t I mention that already, Highness?”

“You did, but I wanted to follow up on a certain aspect. Why worry about people around you? Are you discussing things you don’t want to be heard?”

Arnold asked without any hesitation. Usually, that would make the person asked struggle for a reply.

“No, Highness. We simply do not wish to be judged by the company we hold.”

But Ariel, undisturbed, gave a prompt and honest answer.

“...Company? The valet, again?”

“Yes, Highness. The members of high society would find such a close relationship between aristocrat and their servant to be odd at best. I personally care not for their opinions, but such rumors would damage my brother’s reputation and this is a risk we cannot afford.”

Getting to know that it was actually for her brother, allowed the Crown Prince to calm down his feelings.

“For Vincent, huh? He seems to be putting in a lot of effort these days.”

“He certainly does. Truth be told, he was always capable of this much. Sadly he was chained down by expectations and prejudice of those around him.”

“How so?”

“Most wanted him to be a flawless heir from the start. The perfect, legitimate, eldest son of the Lord.”

“That’s...”

“But nobody is flawless, no person can be perfect at a role from the start Neither was my brother. So he did not meet these expectations. Each of his missteps was met with scorn and each success with indifference. Eventually, he understood he would never be acknowledged for what he was. And he gave up.”

“So it was like this...”

The prejudice aimed at Vincent was of the same kind as the one he was facing. Arnold understood that now.

However, the Crown Prince faced with expectations to do everything right simply worked harder. Vincent didn’t, he just gave up and failed instead.

Although this didn’t absolve young Windhill from the blame for his failure, the prince didn’t hold him in contempt anymore.

At this point, Ariel should have changed the subject, but she carried on.

“It was Rion who made my brother raise his head again.”

“.....”

Immediately, the Crown Prince’s face clouded. Just hearing that name from Ariel’s lips displeased him. Even more so because it was clearly loaded with trust.

With the conversation turning to the topic of Rion, Ariel stopped being reserved with the smiles Arnold craved.

However, even though he had them just in front of him he was not happy, he knew that they were meant for Rion and it made him terribly annoyed.

“You won’t be able to take that servant to the castle with you, you know.”

“Highness?”

“Maids are permitted, no matter the number, but the Queen-to-be cannot take a male with her.”

“...Of course, Highness. I am aware of the fact.”

“That is good. Do keep in mind we will marry immediately after graduation.”

“...By your wish, Highness.”

On this day, the Crown Prince Arnold became clearly aware for the first time. That before he knew it, he had already fallen in love with lady Ariel Windhill. With the full understanding of his feelings, the desire to monopolize her coming from his heart became even stronger.

Arnold didn't know whether that was stimulated by the existence of Rion, or if the valet was entirely unrelated to it. He couldn't understand that about himself yet.

What he knew was that he would never allow that smile of Ariel to be offered to any other man than him.

With this, the flow of the game's events had greatly deviated from the original plot. The only thing that did not, and would not change was upon whom would the misfortune befall when the game reached its conclusion.

Chapter 25

The Shocking Truth

The relationship between Ariel and Arnold improved rapidly and they became closer together. At the moment, it turned into a situation in which they were always moving as a couple.

Rion was oblivious as to what caused it, but he has no plans to investigate the reason. After all, it was a situation he desired. No matter how much it pained him.

But even so, that didn't mean that Rion would stop his other projects. He still didn't know what might happen during their remaining school days or how Ariel's greatest and worst event might unfold. The scene of her being denounced for Maria's harassment was still looming far in the future.

Rion had too many things to do to prepare for that day. One of them was to find evidence supporting Ariel's innocence. It was an unmistakable fact that she was not the one behind the chastisement campaign. However, it was also a fact that Maria was on the receiving end of one.

The rumors still said that his lady was the instigator, so Rion had to gather evidence to disprove them. In due course, he would naturally end up discovering who was really behind all that.

"Should we... Do this? Really? Is this fine?"

"I'm sorry, I just can't help myself. I want you too much."

"Ah... Liar. You only say what I want to hear. But I... I wanted you too."

In one of the unoccupied dorm rooms, Rion was embracing a naked woman on the bed. Since he was getting impatient with the lack of progress and limitations of his investigations, he decided for a cold-hearted approach. It could be said that he was getting so desperate that he didn't mind making Ariel angry anymore, but Rion would not admit that.

His chosen target was one of the House Fatillas maids – Mila, one of Charlotte's handmaidens.

Until now no matter how he investigated Maria's harassment he couldn't get the true picture. Even after giving up on stealth and actually making contact with the perpetrators all he got from them was that even they were convinced that the instructions came from Ariel.

He didn't think that they were acting. After all, they even mistook his approach as a new set of instructions from his lady.

He tried telling them that Ariel never ordered such a thing but they just kept repeating that "they know" with a strangely convinced expression. Apparently they only took it as an command to keep their mouths shut.

He tried repeating the same process with others, but even if Ariel's name didn't surface, they always said that they were instructed by a noble lady from a marquess house.

At that point, he thought he had hit the limits of his investigation, but suddenly he had an epiphany. There was more than one noble lady that matched that description.

However, he couldn't figure out her motive. Charlotte was together with Maria from the early stages. He never thought that she would do something so malicious as arranging harassment behind Lancelot's back while seeing he was actively involved in trying to prevent it.

And after their conversation in the ruined castle, he had an impression that she was a relatively friendly person he wouldn't have trouble getting along with, a polar opposite of devious schemer.

However, since Ariel clearly wasn't the culprit, he had no choice but to doubt Charlotte. Therefore he investigated her conduct and found indications that she indeed did not think well of Maria.

However, that was as much as he could find out with usual means. He still couldn't tell whether she really incited the harassment or not.

So he needed to somehow get closer. That being the case, obvious targets would be people closest to Charlotte. Her maids. In the end, Rion picked Mila because she was

the one who seemed to be attracted to him the most. And so, after arranging an opportunity for them to be in a secluded room together, they effortlessly ended up like this.

“...The others might get really angry when they find out. Let’s keep this a secret between us?”

“Mhm, I know. You would be in big trouble with your precious lady if she found out.”

“It’s not really her... But thinking about it now, wouldn’t Charlotte-sama mind her handmaiden having an affair?”

“She... Would be furious. Obviously.”

“Even more so knowing that I’m a commoner, right?”

“Eh? What do you mean?”

“Doesn’t Charlotte-sama dislike commoners?”

“Where did you hear that from?”

“I might be mistaken. I just heard she hates that female student called Maria.”

“Oh, her. Certainly. But that has nothing to do with her status.”

“How so?”

“That woman gets overly familiar with the Crown Prince. Something my lady desires for herself.”

The maid’s face suddenly stiffened and she looked aghast at what she said. For a moment she forgot herself and secrets slipped splendidly through her lips. Stifling a nauseated laugh Rion replied looking serious.

“Don’t worry, I will keep everything you said a secret between us.”

“I-I see.”

“But... And you don’t have to answer this, I can’t help but wonder whether that makes

her hate Ariel-sama too.”

“I don’t think so? After all, Prince Arnold and Lady Ariel were betrothed long before my lady noticed her feelings.”

“Wouldn’t becoming aware of her feelings give rise to resentment?”

“That would be expected, wouldn’t it? In the past, that might have been the case. But now I doubt it.”

“Why?”

“Because back then that relationship didn’t seem to be harmonious and currently they really do look like they will get married.”

“They do. So you think your lady was anticipating that the prince would lose his fiancée in the past?”

“Sadly, this is not something I can tell you.”

This was a woman’s way of confirming a delicate subject, something Rion heard many times before. So it was clear that Charlotte desired the dissolution of Ariel and Arnold’s engagement. Normally one wouldn’t see this as a motive for organizing harassment of Maria, but he was different.

He was aware of the upcoming bad event looming over Ariel.

(So that event had a mastermind? I don’t know what’s what anymore.)

The complicated web of relationships was starting to confuse him, but there was no mistake that he was able to obtain a huge lead. Compared to his previous results this was huge progress.

“It’s nearly time for us, what would you like to do?”

“What do you mean?”

“Wouldn’t it be a shame to end with just this? You see I was thinking that it’s pretty common for a maid to suffer from unexpected delays while cleaning... How about it?”

“.....You’re right. And that’s fine with me.”

Rion was usually oblivious to inner workings of a woman’s heart but that didn’t stop them from falling head over heels for him when they saw his attentiveness to small details like that. He did know though that thing might end up getting troublesome in the future if he didn’t follow up on this encounter. His plentiful experience told him that.



At the same time, Rion was trying to obtain evidence, there was another person trying to solidify the current state of things. Although it could be said that the two of them had at least one common goal, they did not go hand-in-hand to reach it. At the very least, one would not extend his hand to the other.

There were numerous, vibrant trees around the scene of this event. It was a courtyard, but one so vast it wouldn’t be a stretch to call it a forest. In one of its corners, in stark contrast to the size of the place, a small, elegant party was being held.

Apart from the host, there were four invited guests. It was an extremely private occasion. However, even that being the case there could be many servants seen hovering around.

After all, this place was one of the courtyards of the royal castle. The host was the crown prince Arnold himself. But there were more reasons than just this for the presence of so much staff full of vigor.

Firstly, it might be a private one but this was the first time Arnold held a party on his own. There was a worry that he was not only bad at dealing with crowds but also socially inept, therefore the presence of servants was by all means necessary to make this party a success so that it would lead to another one in the future.

Secondly, the invited guests were important. The prince’s fiancé Ariel and her brother Vincent, and future marquesses Lancelot and Charlotte were gathered. Obviously, Ariel was to be their future queen. Being able to meet the queen candidate for the first time, it was normal for the servants to be in high spirits. The queen, as the most important woman in the realm, was responsible for organizing all the important social occasions and events. If they managed to show their good qualities here, they might be assigned to better roles in the future.

Maria was also taking part, by the way, but to the servants, her existence was irrelevant.

Arnold decided to hold this party to firmly and early establish Ariel as his future wife in the minds of the castle denizens.

And that was indeed a huge success.

It was a result of the attitude that Ariel took towards the servants, not high-handed and oppressive, but also not looking to curry their favor. Their impression of her was that although she was somewhat strict, she was also remarkably beautiful.

If they were to be judged purely by the appearance, Maria would have the upper hand but Ariel had something that her rival lacked.

It was an aura of majesty. Although she was just a child, there was something in Ariel that made her look dignified. That touch of class, even in the presence of Maria, made people think that Ariel would indeed be a fitting queen.

Just by looking at Arnold and Ariel sitting beside each other, the servants could already see the promise of the kingdom flourishing in their reign.

Rion, who was looking at that spectacle from afar, was...

(This is the first time I've seen them like this, they really suit each other.)

...Having the same impression as the other servants.

Rion was also present in the palace. But of course, he was in his role of a valet and only allowed to wait in an area separate from the main venue. This was arranged by the Crown Prince in order to show who was really suited to be at Ariel's side, but Rion had no way of knowing that.

Besides, seeing the two sitting beside each other was something to be delighted about to him. It wasn't that he pretended to be tough, he just always acted towards obtaining Ariel's happiness.

Somehow, his efforts had borne fruit. The only thing he could do now was to protect this situation. So he adjusted his behavior in preparation for that.

Turning his gaze towards other people in the waiting area made it meet with eyes of another person. It was because Mila, Charlotte's handmaiden, was always looking at Rion lately.

Their affair was still continuing. It was something Mila openly desired and Rion didn't want to stop. He felt that there was still information that could be obtained from her; he also had the contrasting feeling that being with her let him forget about other things for a moment.

Because their gazes met, Mila cheerfully approached Rion. She wanted to flaunt her relationship with Rion to others. Especially to the two other maids of Charlotte – Margarete and Sylvia, potentially dangerous existences.

Actually, those two already had some suspicions and were looking at Mila with severe glares.

"How tedious."

"I agree. With so many servants there is hardly anything for us to do."

"They suit each other, don't they?"

"You're right. They do."

"Do you really think so?"

"Of course. Why wouldn't I?"

"I wonder. You're not jealous at all?"

It was Mila who was actually jealous while saying these things. She was just trying to probe Rion's feelings.

"I feel nothing of the sort. All I desire is happiness for my lord and lady."

"What about your own happiness?"

"Not something I think much about."

Rion had no leeway to worry about trivial things like that. There were still so many

things for him to do. Just making Ariel and Vincent graduate without any incident made his hands full.

"I see... But you know, looking at those two makes me long after my own happy ending."

"Does it? I guess it would be nice to get one."

Rion at that moment wasn't in his woman-pleasing mindset and his answer was really insensitive.

"...Are you doing this on purpose?"

"Doing what?"

"You are. You really, really are."

It's only natural for Mila to think this way. The usual Rion she knew was a gentleman who would often shower her with expressions of love.

"What are you talking about?"

"A woman is telling you that she wants to be happy! Shouldn't you be saying 'I will make you happy' to that?!"

"Eh?! Why would I do that?"

"Why?! You ask why!?"

"I'm sorry, please calm down. I am still a minor, marriage is impossible for me, so it was just not on my mind at all."

"You will grow up. What then?"

"...That's still some time away. Isn't it a bit early for that sort of a commitment?"

"Even if I said I need it?"

Although he knew that Mila had an assertive personality, Rion didn't think that it would be to this extent. This would be reaping what he sowed because he couldn't

receive her feelings.

“...This might sound like an excuse, but...”

“But what?”

“You will not find what you desire with me.”

“And how is that not an excuse?”

“It is not...”

Although Rion was a bit worried about the possible consequences, he decided to be honest with her.

“I will explain properly, but only if swear to keep this a secret.”

“...Alright, if you say so.”

Seeing his serious expression Mila figured that Rion wasn't trying to fool her.

Hearing her agree, Rion checked his surroundings to confirm that there was nobody close by, then he took off his eye patch.

“.....Eh?”

Mila's eyes opened wide. That reaction of hers confirmed that she saw what he wanted and he immediately put his eye-patch back on.

“Do you understand now?”

“Yes... I do... Ah, sorry...”

“No need to apologize, your reaction is nothing new. I am used to that by now.”

“...I'm really sorry.”

“It is fine. Really. This is how things were from... Well, from the very beginning.”

“What about your lords?”

“They know. And despite that, they still treated me as a normal person. Lord Vincent and Lady Ariel are very special to me.”

“I see.....”

It was now clear to Mila that she was not.

“Please do not tell anyone. If you break your promise and I hear rumors putting my lord and lady at harm, I will never forgive you.”

As Rion said this, Mila felt a ruthless aura that she had never experienced before from him. Now, knowing about the heterochromatic eyes, she saw Rion like in the legend – a bearer of misfortune.

“Oh, to be honest, I personally wouldn’t really mind that.”

A voice of a third party entered the ears of the frightened maid.

“Vincent-sama? What brings you here? Is there something that requires my assistance?”

With Vincent entering the conversation Rion’s aura had once again returned to normal.

“Well, in a way I guess... She is rather angry you know.”

“She?”

“And now that she is in that kind of mood... People around... Well, is it enough to say even Prince Arnold is scared?”

“EH!? Ah! No! Nothing happened! The maid is... A coincidence! She’s here by coincidence!”

“Y-Yes, that’s right! I was merely...”

Rion denied any relationship to Mila in panic and she supported him in that. However, Vincent merely shook his head at that.

From this Rion was able to deduce that Ariel was angry about a different thing.

“...Why is it then?”

“You took your eye-patch off just now, right? In front of the maid.”

“Ah.....!”

“For Ariel that secret turned into something special only three of us know of.”

“But sir, there are many other people that know already. “

At the very least, all of the servants of House Windhill were aware of his heterochromatic eyes.

“You should know better than expect that this will help you in any way. As for you girl, you should probably get out of here right about now.”

“Yes milord.”

“Also.”

“Sir?”

“Keep your lips sealed. Even if Rion forgives you for spreading tales, I don’t expect my sister to do so.”

“...I understand, lord. I will say nothing.”

Although Mila didn’t personally witness Ariel’s scary side, from the conduct of Vincent and Rion she was able to recognize that the aristocrat was someone not to be angered.

After that, not wanting to be entangled in such circumstances any longer, she hurriedly left the place.

“What awaits me, sir?”

“The usual, perhaps? A whipping would be nostalgic in a way. Even if she’s serious at it.”

“...I knew it.”

Rion knelt dejected on the spot. Vincent could only stare at that servant of his with complex feelings without saying anything. In reality, Ariel was extremely angry at Rion for getting along with that maid. Knowing that Ariel was jealous, he felt a bit melancholic at not being able to convey that to Rion himself.



A little while before the ruckus that Rion caused. There was a couple peeking at the party held in the courtyard. It was Arnold's parents, the rulers of the Gran Flamm kingdom.

Even to the king and the queen, this party was very intriguing. They were surprised that Arnold, who had never been that enthusiastic about his marriage before, personally invited Ariel to that kind of an event.

Although they actually wanted to join, but expecting that their participation would make the party a bigger issue than necessary, they refused their son's invitation and decided to stealthily observe like this.

"Mhm, Lady Ariel has indeed grown beautifully. Her harshness looks to be gone and what remains is a distinct aura of dignity. That change is something unusual coming from a child."

"It is as you say my lord husband, she looks like the right person to stand next to the future king."

"Indeed. We were a little worried before, but it seems that things are going in the right direction now."

"You are absolutely right, majesty."

If the next king, Arnold, didn't get along with his wife, depending on the severity of the situation it might turn into a political issue. There were many people ready to make use of the fact that the king didn't favor his queen.

Arnold's parents were worried about that at first, but now it seemed that their worries are unnecessary.

It was at that moment. From the separate area for visiting staff came raised voices of

people causing a ruckus. It seemed to be a dispute between a valet and a maid. Having a public spat like that showed that the two lacked discipline, but before long, the royal couple saw someone else entering the scene. It was Vincent.

“Looks like the eldest child of House Windhill. He is said to be lacking, his valet obviously is.”

But even so, after seeing the approaching Vincent, the disputing servants separated from one another. With that settled, the eyes of the king returned to the party but in the process, he caught sight of the trembling shoulders of his queen.

“What happened!? Are you not feeling well!?”

“...O-Our chil... survived.....”

The queen whispered with a shaking voice.

“What!? D-Don’t tell me...!?”

The king had an idea what this might have been about. He tried to find out more, but the queen having fainted was unable to reply.

From this day on, for a short time, the royal capital would be buzzing with rumors.

It seemed that the princess, that had been missing for years, resurfaced in the Academy. Her name was Maria Theodore.

The world was heading towards the goal set by the story. All to prepare the final event that loomed over the Academy.

Chapter 26

A Weapon Obtained

Having Ariel and Vincent get closer to commoner students brought as much benefits to Rion as it did to them.

Any non-noble trying to enroll in the Academy had to undergo a strict examination. Its main purpose was to test whether that person would have any future and be an asset to the Kingdom in the arena of politics so its difficulty was no laughing matter.

Candidates who were able to overcome such a hurdle, even though they were excellent scholars, wouldn't be treated on par with the aristocrats. They would never reach the top of the Academy rankings as the subjects like fencing and magic were completely removed from their curriculum while their grades weren't announced separately. All this was arranged so that the prestige of young nobles was protected.

Regardless of all this, they surely were good at studying. Possibly even better than what Rion was capable of.

There was no way that Rion would ever refuse relying on them. In fact, he asked them to become Vincent's tutors of his own accord.

Those students gladly took upon the offer. In part, so they could get closer to a marquess house, but mostly to get closer to Ariel.

"Redistribution of wealth? What on earth is that?"

One of the male students invoked this concept while they were learning economics. It was Vincent's first time hearing that idea.

"As things in the kingdom stand now the rich get richer all the time and the poor are constantly worse off. This trend is obviously bad."

"I concur. But could you elaborate on the subject?"

"The people that increase their wealth are aristocrats and major merchant groups."

“That’s correct”

The way that student spoke carried a hint of criticism. Vincent, as a relative of a marquess, stood at the apex of the wealthy. This made him feel quite awkward.

“The wealth of the less privileged citizens is being sucked dry by those at the top. If this is to continue unchecked, the general populace is going to wither away and the flow of money will stop. That, in turn, will lead to demise of the rich.”

“...I see.”

Although the explanation was rather exaggerated, it made the concept easier to understand for Vincent.

“And that in turn will make the King lose the support of his subject and lead to the disintegration of the crown.”

“What!?”

This statement, as expected, was not something that Vincent could ignore.

“Ah, apologies lord. I got carried away with my projections. What I was trying to get across is that health of the royal treasury depends on the financial health of its subjects. If the general populace suffers too much, the country will eventually suffer too and start to stagnate.”

“...You are right, I guess. It’s hard to do anything when no one is capable of paying tax to finance the tasks.”

“That is so. This is where redistribution of wealth comes into play. If all of the kingdom’s wealth was to be split fairly between its subjects the disparity in life circumstances would be erased and everyone’s livelihood would become stable. That would increase overall tax yield and help the treasury.”

“I see.”

“Pretty theory. Also utterly wrong.”

“Wrong? Why?”

Another student raised a dissenting voice while Vincent was starting to show the signs of agreement.

“There is a major flaw in that line of thinking.”

“What did you say? Stop manufacturing problems where there are none! I dare you to prove me wrong!”

The first student would not put up with being told his presentation was wrong and started to raise his voice.

“You said redistributing wealth is “fair”. How can you even call it that?”

The dissenting student replied calmly without faltering. It showed that he had that much confidence in his thoughts.

“What do you mean?”

“This world is not ideal, there are people that work hard and people who do not. Isn’t it fair for the former to accumulate more wealth than the latter?”

“That’s...”

“Your theory ignores the effort of an individual. Distributing reward while ignoring effort will impact the motivation of the hard-working people and they will be discouraged from doing so much work. Drop of productivity will depress the tax yield.”

“All contributions can be individually assessed.”

“Won’t that give birth to disparity of wealth?”

“Would you rather keep things as they are then?!”

The student on the losing side of the argument snapped. The other party was hindering him from being acknowledged by Vincent and that was making him angry.

“I never said that. I do think that this country should be changed. However, the problems that need addressing are more fundamental than wealth disparity.”

“...What do you consider more important then?”

“The voice of the populace does not reach the halls of power. Right now the politics is a privilege for the aristocracy.”

“Obviously. Isn’t that why we are studying like this?”

“Will that help any of us have an impact on the political arena?”

“That... Depends on perseverance.”

“Stop deluding yourself! Even you should know it’s futile regardless of how hard you work.”

“What else can we do!?”

“Even this Academy has fundamental problems! There are so many things that should be fixed!”

Like this, the calm conversations of the students turned rather heated. That being the case, the dispute wouldn’t die down anytime soon. It turned into a passionate debate that had little left to do with studying.

“My next..... Hmm..... The next exam is...”

Vincent’s muttering had been ignored in all this.

Even though there was an occasional detour, the student’s tutelage enthusiastically continued just like this. Thanks to this, Rion’s role changed from the one doing the teaching to the one being taught. This was something great for him, as preparing to teach Vincent was a time-consuming process.

The time freed by this was in turn invested by Rion into information gathering.

“That’s quite troublesome. Doesn’t she even notice that the Crown Prince dislikes her?”

“That woman is quite insensitive.”

“You’re right. And that will just not do, it incurs the wrath of so many people.”

“Like Lady Ariel, right? It’s completely understandable, they are betrothed after all.”

“I see you understand very well.”

“...Please leave it to me. I will make sure to point out all her wrongs.”

“I see. I am certain that will make many people happy.”

“Yes. Please look forward to that. “

(...Scary.)

Hiding in the shadow of the school building, Rion was taught about the scariness of women from this conversation. The ones talking were Charlotte and a student that Rion didn't personally know. That female student was splendidly manipulated by Charlotte.

The young aristocrat was quite clever. Never actually saying the name of Ariel by herself, but still able to implant the impression that Ariel personally desired the chastisements of Maria.

Lady Charlotte he exchanged words with, the friendly and kindhearted lady, was actually capable of things like this. Rion felt like he was forcefully reminded of the threat of a woman that went mad for love.

That aside, he caught her in the act. What he should do now was to record the contents of the conversation, confirm the identity of the woman, and find out what she would do to Maria.

Rion had no intention of denouncing Charlotte outright. Even if he did that and was able to put a stop to her actions, any future chastisements of Maria would still be linked to Ariel.

Rion was determined to record all the things that Charlotte did and the things she was about to do. Even if she denied involvement, people would have to reconcile the overwhelming detail of the evidence he collected.

Today, again, he was able to add a record to the list. Surely that would pile up in the future.

Whatever came out of this, Rion felt that he was able to obtain a weapon that could protect Ariel.

But not just limited to that, the range for Rion's information gathering activity extended beyond the Academy. That was also due to the newly freed time he used to spend teaching Vincent.

Rion was currently at the Windhill mansion. There was a side entrance at the back of the complex he was not aware of until now. The truth is he wanted to investigate Julia's place directly, but that would lead to unnecessary risk. In the end, if he was caught spying, any chance of obtaining useful information would be lost.

What he was looking for was not necessarily an important piece of information, even gathering a larger number of shallow rumors would suffice. From that, after figuring out what he should be looking for, he could consider digging deeper.

And finally, he struck gold. It looked like Rion's intuition was quite right because he was able to find confirmation of his suspicions.

"The next meeting will be in three days."

The man who came out of the back entrance was discussing the next time of his next visit. That man was the leader of the vassal families of the House Windhill, Viscount Austin. The person he was informing was the valet of Erwin, Will Dirk. After a pause for thought, he added...

"But I guess it would be best if I didn't come here too often."

"Lord Marquess doesn't really come to this place anymore and you have avoided other employees thus far. I fail to see any risks?"

"If I continue to avoid other staff so much, suspicions are bound to rise."

"About how very... Successful... Is your relationship with Julia?"

Rion, hearing this phrase, broke into an open, wide smile.

It solidified his circumstantial evidence. They were calling an official concubine of a marquess, a person superior in rank to them, without honorifics and the way Will joked implied that they had a mature relationship. That relationship obviously progressed to the point where such a thing was fine.

"Fool. If this comes out, then there will be serious consequences. For all of us."

“Calm down. Nobody will know.”

The villainous ways of the viscount brought another smile from Rion. It felt more comfortable taking on the dastardly enemies than the virtuous ones. Still, Rion wouldn't hesitate either way, even when facing somebody on the side of the good.

“...What nerve. What do you think will happen to the connection between us if you're wrong?”

“Connection? If that happens, I don't know you. That's the last thing I care about...”

Will paused for a second.

“...And as for the woman, no pity. She's useful, but there are no feelings involved. “

Very apt statement. If he could, Rion would've said those words to Will and Viscount Austin.

“I am certain she feels the same. If we're talking ambition, then hers is greater.”

“I don't think her plans will go very well.”

“That depends on how she goes about it. Fortunately, the current heir is really foolish. There are many openings to exploit”

“The Lord dotes on Vincent-sama a lot. There's no way he'll remove him from succession.”

“No matter what the Marquess Windhill thinks, Erwin is the best heir. As long as we can spread that sentiment around, things will go fine. Actually, everything is heading in that direction already.”

“...But even so, nothing is for certain.”

Even if they had some influence, they had no way to force their demands. Just like the royal family. That's how things looked like from Will's perspective. Rion was currently spying on them in fear of that influence, though.

“Well, I don't care even if the plan fails. She wants it, not me.”

“You are your own... , No, go back now. There’s no telling if someone is watching us.”

In actuality, there was indeed someone looking at them right then – Rion. It was too late for Will to say such things. They had already divulged plenty of information.

“You’re right. Well then, next time.”

Viscount Austin left the back entrance. Will, after seeing him off, went back inside. The only person left in that place was Rion hidden nearby.

(Very intriguing conversation. It lets one feel the complexity of human relationships.)

He was not referring to the relationship between Julia and Austin but rather the relationship between Austin and Will, along with the probable unexpected relationship between Erwin and the viscount. He was able to draw plenty of conclusions from the content of that conversation.

Although he had drawn a certain line when it came to Will, one could feel that Austin treated the servant with a certain familiarity. On the other hand, Will’s attitude towards the viscount was unrestrained. Rion pondered what could this mean and an answer surfaced immediately. What he needed now was influential backing, but such a thing couldn’t be found in the manor.

(It would’ve been interesting if this world actually had DNA tests.)

Rion thought of this jest based on his knowledge of the otherworld. Unfortunately, he was the only person that could find it amusing.

And so Rion, once again obtained a weapon, this one to protect Vincent.



Rion was again conducting information gathering but of a different kind than what he did earlier. He was not looking for weapons, he was trying to verify some assumptions.

Waiting behind the shadow of the school building, he saw a female student walking towards him. The light of the sun shone on her glossy black hair, it was Maria. It seemed that she hadn’t noticed Rion.

Rion was also not looking directly at her but was mentally calculating the distance she

had left to travel.

She was thirty steps away from the target location... , twenty steps..... , ten..... , nine..., eight... , seven.....

“Maria!”

Lancelot had called upon Maria. Rion could only smack his lips in regret.

Maria turned around and headed towards the noble with happy strides, waving her hands. Although that might seem to be adorable, it was excessively irritating to Rion.

Another attempt failed. After Maria left, a stray dog began walking towards the spot Maria was originally supposed to pass by. It was a stray, a rare sight in this world.

Suddenly the animal disappeared from sight, an event followed by a pained yelp.

There was a huge and deep hole in the ground at the spot the stray dog just walked on. Within that hole, the stray dog, pierced by numerous stakes, laid dead.

(Another failure. This one will be quite hard to cover up.)

Just thinking of the cleanup made him break into a sigh. But even so, there was no way he can leave that as is, he began the work while being mindful of his surroundings.

Then, on yet another day.

Rion was looking at the third floor of a certain school building. Although it seemed as if there was no one behind the windows, looking carefully, there were several heads of female students peeking from behind the frame.

The thing those girls were currently looking at, was Maria gathering her belongings scattered on the ground underneath while muttering complaints.

It was a spectacle that he had seen before. Someone had probably thrown her bag out of the window again. The culprits were most likely the girls peeking through the window on the third floor.

But their plan didn't end with just that bit of harassment. One could see the shape of a bucket on the window ledge.

It was obviously heavy as it took two female students to pick it up. It was because the bucket was filled with water. The girls then let it go out of their hands, throwing it through the window. Of course, obeying gravity, the bucket fell to the ground.

At that moment, Rion muttered...

“...Freeze.”

The bucket was falling directly above Maria. However, it still failed to hit her. As Rion was muttering the spell a gust of wind had blown. It caused one of the notes on the ground to fly away at speed. Maria hurriedly pursued the sheet of paper.

The bucket fell behind her with a loud crashing sound.

“Eh!?”

Maria, surprised by such noise turned her head back and glanced towards the deformed bucket half-buried in the ground.

“...How cruel. Wouldn't this hurt if this hit someone?”

The water inside the bucket was completely frozen. If such a thing hit someone's head, the outcome would be serious indeed.

As Maria left the place while still muttering her complaints, the ice inside the bucket melted and sank into the ground. At this time, the female students from the third floor decided to head down and heckle Maria whom they expected to be soaking wet. But the only thing that remained on site was the bucket with a small amount of water.

Another failure. However, Rion didn't feel down. Because this result is within his expectations. As he predicted, it would be impossible to kill the protagonist Maria.

There were numerous amount of times when Maria was soaked by water in situations like this. However, whenever Rion tried to freeze the water it would never hit her successfully. It was the same when he tried pitfalls. She stopped before them many times, always with seemingly important reasons, always being saved by chance events.

Although it was called chance, it was actually the will of the world protecting Maria.

His last resort. Rion was still not able to obtain a weapon that would make it possible.

Chapter 27

Event: The Academy Ball

Inside the Academy grounds, servants of the nobles could be seen hurrying about busily. It was all in preparation for the grand ball that was to be held later today. The female students in particular, with the gala event looming large in front of them, have fully devoted themselves to getting ready. That was the main reason why their staff was busy.

Although, the Academy Ball was being held under the pretext of familiarizing students with the refined ways of aristocrats, In fact, it was much closer to a festival and was the grandest event on the Academy calendar.

That was also the same in the game. It was a huge turning point in the plot as the protagonist attempted to conquer her capture target.

Crown Prince Arnold, unusually for him unaccompanied and currently hidden in the shadow of the dorm building didn't, of course, know that. He thought of the ball as just a festival event in the Academy. However, he was also planning on making it into a turning point.

Right now he was searching for a person essential for that purpose and he was considerably bothered by being unable to spot him. All the female students secluded themselves in their changing rooms to put on ball-gowns and makeup that they prepared beforehand just for the sake of this day. The Crown Prince was aware of that, so he was searching for the valet whose face he usually couldn't stand the sight of, but even that servant was nowhere to be found.

This misunderstanding was really unlike Arnold. The preparations involving the dress and the cosmetics were obviously the job of the maids. In no case would the help of a valet be required. It was also obvious that the valet in question would be with his lord, assisting in his dressing room. But even if the prince was thinking straight, he didn't remember the faces of Ariel's handmaidens either. Therefore it would be quite impossible for him to find them before the ball started.

When he finally started considering giving up due to an expectation that continuing

his search would eat too much of the remaining time, he happened to hear female voices.

“What kind of face is that woman making right now, I wonder?”

“Deathly pale? Crying, possibly?”

“Would she cry, really? No matter what is done to her, we can’t wipe that pesky smirk from her face.”

“You’re right. She thinks us fools and herself different from all the other women. Expecting many handsome men to lend her a helping hand.”

“...Oh, did she say such a thing?”

“No. But I feel that’s what she really thinks.”

“I think I agree. Indeed, she does carry this foul air around herself.”

“I know, right?”

Arnold was dumbfounded, or perhaps unsettled would be the better word, by being faced with the terror of a woman’s dark side that one wouldn’t normally witness straight up.

However, he also immediately realized the meaning behind the words of those students. They have done something horrible to someone to the point that it would make them cry.

As for who that someone could be. The answer came to him immediately.

“...Arnold-sama?”

Suddenly hearing a voice coming from behind him caused Arnold’s shoulders to tremble from surprise. If a female student saw him hiding in the shadows by the changing rooms, there was no telling what horrible misunderstandings might that give birth to.

He figured that in that case he should just clear up any confusion from the start, or perhaps just boldly state his intentions but it was already too late for that.

“Uhm... Maria...”

Although it still didn't really make it fine to be discovered like this, the situation was better than being found out by a female student he had never spoken to before.

Arnold turned around and spoke looking a bit relieved.

“...Why are you like this?”

What the Crown Prince saw was Maria sticking part of her body out of a small window. Her shoulders and arm were naked and at a glance, she did not seem to be wearing anything at all.

“Ah... I was trying to change into my dress... But the dress now...”

Suddenly her face turned gloomy. Just by seeing that, Arnold was able to deduce the rest. She was clearly the subject of the conversation from just before.

“Damaged beyond repair?”

“...Yes.”

“I see...”

The prince heard the rumors about chastisements that Maria was subjected to as well. It was a subject frequently raised by Lancelot. However because every time Ariel was offered as the mastermind, Arnold never took that information seriously.

But nevertheless, he knew that the chastisements were a fact. One he would, frankly, be happier not knowing about.

“Erm...”

Maria prompted timidly as Arnold was looking at his feet feeling down.

“...What is it?”

“Is that perhaps for me?”

“Eh?”

“The box Arnold-sama is holding, there’s a dress in it, right?”

“Y-Yeah... That’s true, but...”

Arnold was currently holding a huge box by his side. It did indeed contain a dress. The reason Maria knew that...

It was also a part of the event. In the game, the prince, worrying that Maria couldn’t afford a new dress, had one prepared for her so that she would not lose face during the ball. It was something that was supposed to boost the relationship between the protagonist and Arnold significantly.

“I’m happy. For Arnold-sama to go to such lengths for me...”

Maria, going by her game knowledge, was clearly convinced that the dress was for her.

“Ah, no, this is...”

“Please go around the building. There’s a side entrance there.”

Saying this, Maria immediately disappeared inside the window. Arnold was left dumbfounded looking for a way out of the situation but...

“But this is... Haa..... , I guess there’s no choice...”

Muttering that, he decided to go towards the entrance to the dressing rooms where Maria was waiting.



A long time had passed since the beginning of the ball was announced. But the essential leading character was nowhere to be found.

It was the Crown Prince of the kingdom, who together with his fiancée should naturally perform the first dance in the master of the ceremonies mind.

However, even though the event commenced, Arnold was yet to appear. What’s more, his presumed partner, Ariel, had already arrived at the assembly hall a long time ago. Nobody meant her ill, but people present had a sudden premonition of trouble.

And that premonition had materialized.

Arnold had finally appeared in the hall, but at his side was Maria wearing a dress that was clearly arranged for her.

The prince was dressed in a black, military-style outfit with several prominent red accents typical for the royal family, Maria was wearing a brilliant white ball gown. Together the two looked as if they stepped out of a painting. The sight was so beautiful that it took everyone's breath away. Which was not unexpected. It was the protagonist together with her capture target after all. There was no way they would be ill-matched.

As the two entered, the music in the hall started naturally. Being lightly pulled by Maria, slightly embarrassed-looking Arnold stepped forward towards the center. Although he was, in fact, actually bewildered, from the perspective of the surroundings, he was just being bashful.

Like this, the first dance, lead by Arnold and Maria was under way and the ball had started properly. Their performance on the floor elicited spontaneous sighs from the hall. Particularly from people watching it from the corners of the room.

In the corner of the room where Ariel was seated, someone sighed while other attendees there were all holding their breath. Everyone here was full of sympathy for her and anger at Maria for stealing the first dance. Many students here had mixed thoughts like this, but none of them was able to talk to Ariel about this.

There were only two people in existence who could speak with Ariel in such a situation. Because one of them didn't have the social position to participate in the ball, the job fell to the other one present.

"...Hmm, now that I think about it, it has been a while. Shall we dance?"

"Ah?"

Vincent's words took Ariel by surprise splendidly.

"It has been a while since I danced with my sister and I was thinking it would be nice to do so again."

"That is true. But will onii-sama really be alright?"

“I... Don’t know.”

Although Vincent was able to overcome so many things purely with his hard work, there were things towards which he had no talent whatsoever and where no amount of hard work would help.

One of those was dancing. He was so poor at it that Ariel changed her dancing partner to Rion permanently.

“It will be fine. A dance here would be a good practice for onii-sama after all.”

“I see. Well then. Beloved sister, may I please have the pleasure of this dance?”

“Yes. I would be glad to.”

Vincent took his sister’s hand and in an ostentatious manner went towards the center of the room. Unfortunately, the showcasing of his good points as a brother ended with that.

His dancing steps were so clumsy that he would have probably tripped had his partner not been Ariel. Also far from being the one to lead, he was the one paying attention to every move his sister made.

It was so pathetic that the people watching could not bear to restrain themselves any longer and began chuckling. The nervousness of the whole assembly was blown away instantly.

That made Ariel angry and mid-way through the dance she glared at everybody which sent them scurrying back in panic.

By now everyone considered this event a humiliation for the Windhills, but the two people at its center...

“Jeez, because of onii-sama, we’ve become the butt of a joke.”

“And what’s wrong with that? Let’s laugh this off and enjoy ourselves anyway.”

They were enjoying the dance although in a different way than other people.

“It’s unsightly for a lady to laugh openly in public on an occasion like this. This may be

just a school event, but it is still a social gathering, you know?”

“Yes, that is true. We won’t be able to fully enjoy ourselves in such a formal place after all, will we?”

“Indeed...”

Suddenly, the two began to think of the ball as too formal. It was because they discovered types of enjoyment that couldn’t be obtained by just following formal etiquette.

“Well, in that case, shall we change venues?”

“Eh?”

“It seems those unable to participate in this event have been planning their own lively gathering in a different place on their own accord. I was also invited. Shall we go together?”

“...But...”

“Let that woman be the partner of the Crown Prince tonight. You’ll have that job after marriage whether he likes it or not.”

“Onii-sama, that is quite a problematic statement, you know?”

“Is it now? To be honest, I don’t... Nevermind, come, let’s have some actual fun.”

“Onii-sama, really...”

The jests that he was making were aimed at himself. Ariel noticed that Vincent was actually considerably angry underneath.

Neglecting his fiancée and taking another woman as his partner for the night. This was nothing but an act of humiliation for Ariel. There was no way that Vincent would forgive such malice towards his beloved sister.

But even so, with the offending party being the Crown Prince, he had no choice but to put up with it. And not being able to vent, his anger wouldn’t die down.

There was only one way to calm him. They had to cheer themselves up by spending their time enjoyably with their amiable circle of friends.

Shortly after that conversation, the silhouettes of the siblings had disappeared from the ball.



Although it was obvious, the ball continued despite the disappearance of Vincent and Ariel. Arnold who had to dance with Maria due to the turn of events finally managed to extricate himself midway but knowing how much he had messed up, he was very flustered.

That was because he noticed the stares after Ariel was led by Vincent to dance. Sympathy and scorn among other things, glances like those shouldn't be directed towards the fiancée of a crown prince.

Afterward, Ariel got angry, stopped dancing and left. That in turn, twisted the stares even more horribly.

This was all his fault.

Although he immediately wanted to go after Ariel, the dance wasn't over just yet. As he thought that he was finally set free, a shout for an encore was raised out of nowhere and he had to dance along to another melody. Whether it was his habit of meeting the expectations of the surroundings or just his indecisiveness, by not excusing himself after two dances he would have to suffer self-inflicted consequences.

Although he was finally able to go to Ariel after the encore, she was nowhere to be found. While he tried to find out where she was headed to, he was suddenly pulled into another dance. The timing was a little cruel. But during the times he avoided Ariel, she had always been the dance partner of Arnold after all.

With that being the case, he felt unable to turn down Charlotte's invitation, and the problem of Ariel got postponed again.

This might have been a part of forcing the state of things to conform to game plot. This event was supposed to be when everyone would finally acknowledge the relationship between Arnold and Maria. This was also supposed to be when Ariel loses face by

trying to chastise Maria.

The only thing that was against the plot at this point was that Arnold still had feelings for Ariel. This would be the next thing the World would focus on.



Finally being freed from the ball, the Crown Prince Arnold was now heading towards the academy's backyards.

He managed to shake off the surroundings and asking for a place where Ariel could be most likely found, he was told that she must be with Vincent.

Although people couldn't point him to a specific place, they said judging from the conversation of the two, they left to attend a separate event. He inquired the master of ceremonies about this and was told that every year, those with lower social status would be holding an informal banquet.

After considering the relationship between the Windhill siblings and the commoners, he had no more doubts. The two of them must have headed towards there.

As he walked towards the place where such a banquet should be held, he could hear lively music even from afar. When he was just a small distance from the site his feet had spontaneously hastened their pace.

But what welcomed him was the sight of Rion and Ariel happily dancing while being illuminated by the bonfire in the center.

(Again! Why is it always him!?)

The impatience caused by getting Ariel angry has turned into wrath due to the thought of them being able to dance so happily despite him almost losing his nerve.

It would be hard to assert that this was a completely unreasonable anger. The feelings of Arnold towards Ariel were really earnest, There was no way for the grievance of his feelings not being able to reach her to be entirely wrong.

What was wrong, however, was the part of it was him pushing all the fault for the situation on the other party.

Arnold drew the sword hanging at his waist and headed towards the crowd.

Students that looked at him immediately recognized what was going on, stopping their happy conversations mid-word. The fear of what might happen had they said anything right then rendered them mute.

The Crown Prince was not even paying them any mind and went straight towards Rion glaring at him.

Rion had also immediately noticed Arnold as well as what the prince might be planning to do.

He had no way of dealing with the situation, so he resolved to do absolutely nothing.

The sword was raised high. It was about to be swung down on Rion's head. Someone shrieked as if imagining the tragedy about to unfold.

What followed was Arnold's cry.

"...Someone like you!"

The arc of the blade was intercepted by a wooden pole from the side. It was Vincent blocking the strike with a piece of wood. While the Prince's blade might have been a weapon, but a purely ceremonial one.

And then another person to block Arnold's sword.

With both her arms spread wide, protecting Rion from the Crown Prince, it was Ariel.

"Step aside, Ariel!"

"I will not!"

"Do you not hear my orders!?"

"...I do not!"

"You are my fiancée! Why are you protecting that man!"

"This and that is different! Why does your highness aim his sword at Rion!?"

“That’s.....!”

The Crown Prince was not able to admit to her that it was caused by jealousy. The flow of events might have changed had he overcome his shame and put it into words.

But no, that would not happen. There was no way the World would permit that.

“Vincent.”

The prince escaped Ariel’s stare, the name he called was Vincent’s.

“...Highness?”

“You will dismiss that valet.”

“That is... Not something I can do, highness.”

“This is an order, Vincent.”

“Even so. No servant can be dismissed without justification.”

“Lèse-majesté is a capital offence. A reason enough.”

“On what ground does your highness invoke that...”

“Does House Windhill think to go against the crown?”

“Highness...”

That was obviously rather unfair of the prince. Involving the name of their House in the context of going against the will of the royal family, with this Vincent wouldn’t be able to speak against it anymore.

However, they were not the only people in this place. And that also was Vincent’s misfortune.

“What disrespect? If Rion was disrespectful, then you are a boor!”

“Who was that! Who dared to say this!?”

...Yelled Vincent. It was partly a warning to all present to go no further than this. The students here all understood that and some averted their eyes away from nobles while others began feigning ignorance.

However, there's no way the Crown Prince would be satisfied with just that. Those words just now were, without a doubt, a ridicule towards him who was a royalty. Whoever said that should be the one being truly questioned for lèse-majesté and Arnold had never experienced such a treatment from his surroundings before.

"You all will present whoever that was right now."

"...Majesty, we do not know who that was."

"And you think that will excuse you!?"

"Your highness, your vassal begs for clemency for people here. Please show magnanimity."

"Why would I ever do that!?"

"We beg for your highness' indulgence..."

Vincent was kneeling on the ground deeply bowing his head. After Arnold's first refusal Ariel and Rion followed suit.

"I know this is not enough to soothe your highness' just rage, but please find it in yourself to forgive them just once."

The students watching this turn of events were much more surprised than Arnold. Even if their relationship was good, Vincent was of a marquess rank and belonged to the top echelon of the society. And here, just to protect one of them, he was prostrating himself on the ground, even with it happening in front of their eyes they still found it unbelievable.

Furthermore, even the subject of their longing, the noble Ariel was doing so as well. They were not only moved, but were also angry at Arnold who made Ariel do such a thing.

Vincent's actions began to turn counterproductive.

“...I will not pursue this.”

Arnold also noticed rising unrest in those present here, which is why he agreed.

“We thank for your highness’ grace.”

As Vincent raised his head to convey his gratitude, he saw the Crown Prince already turned his back to leave.

The matter would obviously not be settled just with this. Arnold had to let an offense slide against his will. For him, that was a disgrace. And he would hold a grudge towards people that brought such shame on him – Vincent and the others.

That day Maria would finally hear the words she was expecting from the Crown Prince. He desired dissolution of his engagement to Ariel.

And not just that. He stated publicly that the Windhill siblings harbored a lack of respect towards the royal family. Both Lancelot and Erwin, Vincent’s step-brother, were overjoyed by that pronouncement.

As the year progressed towards the last event in the Academy, the World’s preparations steadily progressed without a hitch.

Chapter 28

The New Target of Malice

The turmoil at the ball had left Rion greatly perplexed.

He thought that things had certainly been heading in a good direction. Vincent was now followed by many people, even if all of them were students of low social status. The distance between Ariel and Arnold had shrunk so much that Rion himself was surprised.

That gave their circumstances enough resilience to avoid the bad ending, he felt certain of that.

However, due to the incident at the ball, all that resilience seemed to vanish in an instant. And on top of that, things seemed to head into worst possible direction.

On the day of the ball, the Crown Prince offered Ariel a very harsh look with a palpable undertone of hatred. He gave Vincent the same kind of stare.

Rion was entirely without a clue as to why things developed like that.

He had heard of what happened in the ballroom from Vincent. How Arnold took Maria as his partner for the first dance. Although this made Rion considerably angry, it was clear that when Arnold stormed into their banquet he was gripped by rage on a completely different scale.

That wrath was surely focused on Rion. To the point that the prince even drew his sword against him. However, why that was the case, Rion did not know.

When he inquired Ariel about it, she only told him not to mind it. When he asked Vincent, he got no answer, although his lord looked like he wanted to say something for a moment. From this Rion understood that the subject was something that was difficult to talk about.

That left him with no obvious person he could discuss it with but as one could expect it was hard for him to give up on this matter. Trying to find a way forward, after

considering all possible individuals he could approach, he settled on Charlotte.

The idea was that she would definitely know the Crown Prince's feelings, but for her the question was unbearable.

"...Why was the Crown Prince so angry, eh? "

Charlotte, hearing that, couldn't help but show unhappiness on her face.

"I am sorry lady Charlotte. I know it is not proper to ask you that, but I need to know the reason and, by now, I have no other way of finding out."

The truth is there were many others to ask. He could, for example, go to the students present at the location of the incident, they would assuredly tell him the reason. The reason why Rion couldn't think of that was because Rion never considered himself to be the cause of the problem.

"Are you truly that clueless?"

"So it seems lady."

"And that is the reason."

"Eh?"

"It stirs anger even in me."

The answer that Rion was seeking, involved the feelings of the Crown Prince towards Ariel. And he expected Charlotte, who had fallen in love with Arnold, to explain the details. It was natural for her to be angry.

"...Did I perhaps do something bad?"

These words had rubbed Charlotte the wrong way even more.

"To describe it in one word... Insensitivity, obliviousness, impudence, thoughtlessness..."

"Lady... That is more than one word..."

"And that is still not enough to describe my irritation."

“...My deepest apologies.”

Charlotte suspected that Rion was aware of her feelings for Arnold and that was exactly why he came to her for the explanation expecting her to have the full understanding of the circumstances.

Actually behaving like that revealed Rion to be very callous. He didn't know that this disregard for anyone that wasn't Vincent or Ariel was the exact reason for the current failure.

“Lady?”

“After all, the truth is certain to upset you. Do you still wish to hear it?”

She was giving him a choice even though she was angry with him, that was Charlotte's kindness.

“I do lady. I must know the reason.”

“I see. Let me enlighten you then.”

“You have my full attention.”

“Jealousy.”

“...Eh?”

Unable to understand the meaning behind Charlotte's answer, Rion was just standing there with his mouth wide open. Charlotte, seeing that, broke into a bitter smile. She realized that he was not playing dumb and really was this thick-headed. This dampened her anger and left her in a state of wonder.

“You heard right. Prince Arnold was jealous of you.”

“But why?”

“I am sorry, but I do not understand your question. Anyone looking at you and Ariel Windhill together would be jealous, it would be strange for Arnold not to.”

“I am just a servant in lady Ariel's household, ours is not a relationship that should

earn jealousy of his highness.”

“I do not disagree. Frankly, you do seem to have the same bond with your lord – a deep connection between two parties sharing strong faith in each other.”

Charlotte thought that she was a person that shared a similar relationship with him, one of friendship. Now, however, she knew she misunderstood.

“This is how I saw it myself, lady.”

“However, while it is not odd between you and Vincent, Ariel is a woman.”

“But there is nothing more to relationship between milady Ariel and me.”

“Facts matter little. It... Appears that his highness’ fiancée harbors special feelings for another man. Would you, in his place, turn a blind eye to that?”

“...Does the Crown Prince wish to be the only special existence in milady’s life?”

Rather than answering Charlotte’s question, he replied with a question of his own. It was because he felt that something was stopping him from offering an answer.

“This... Is not something I presume to know.”

Once again Charlotte evaded Rion’s question. She gave an impression of not wanting to put her knowledge into words. That in itself was an answer of sorts.

“Is that so...”

The Crown Prince Arnold favored Ariel. That was exactly the situation that Rion desired. However, it shocked him to learn that he was the one hindering further progress the most.

He understood he was naive. He now saw that while he deluded himself pretending to work for Ariel’s happiness he was actually moving according to his own desires. And the Crown Prince saw through all this.

Even though he had sworn to abandon everything in order to protect the siblings, in the end, he was not able to abandon his feelings. He yielded to the temptation of more enjoyable moments with Ariel.

What should he do now that he realized that? It was as Charlotte said. The answer upset him.

For Ariel and Arnold to start to get along again, he must disappear from the picture. With that being obvious, he had resolved himself. The time for them to part ways would come earlier than expected.

When exactly? He would be the one to decide, no matter how much pain that would bring him.

“...I thank you very much, lady Charlotte.”

“Are you really being grateful, I wonder?”

Rion’s expression, far from being grateful, looked depressed and melancholic.

“Your words made me realize I was avoiding confronting the truth.”

“I see.”

Rion’s words allowed Charlotte to realize something too. Rion was now thinking of Ariel as a woman, not just his mistress. And he would choose the hard way forward.

“What will you do now?”

“It is clear to me what needs to be done. However... I am not yet sure how to go about it.”

“...There is no need to hurry, I think. Take your time, consider the options carefully, pick the best method once you are certain.”

“Your advice is wise and appreciated, lady. Sadly there is no time for careful planning, I must decide soon.”

“I see... Well, if this is what you want...”

“It is.”

However, the World wouldn’t even give Rion time to make a decision. That’s because the World itself was out of time. The conclusion of the Academy arc was drawing near.

Erwin had no memory of having a father in his childhood.

Once he became aware of the world around him, he naturally came to think that his father must have already died. His mother and, to an even greater extent, the lady who attended to his needs – that was all of the family he had as far as he was concerned.

He never thought much of it, until the day he learned the truth.

Erwin's father was alive. He was even living close by. He had two siblings and a stepmother that gave birth to those children. However, his new family was treating him coldly.

Initially, Erwin didn't know the reason why he was hated by his step mother and her children. Even when he was told that it was because her mother was a concubine of the Lord, there was no one able to explain to the child Erwin what a concubine was.

Erwin didn't know how much antagonism he and his mother would earn just by living within the manor of the marquess, nor how much suffering it would cause to Vincent and Ariel who were caught in the situation. To the siblings, Erwin and his mother were the cause of discord in their family.

But then even if he knew all that he probably still wouldn't agree with their assessment. Erwin thought that he was living in hardship while in reality he actually had quite a sheltered upbringing.

His mother was doting on him. Even the manor servants treated Erwin, a member of the marquess lineage, as their lord even though he was a son of a concubine and he lived without inconvenience.

Erwin's self-consciousness developed in that kind of environment.

And like that the opportunity for Erwin's hubris to grow arrived. It was the [Ceremony of Trials]

His good results and the huge failure of Vincent the year before resulted in the people's evaluation of Erwin growing higher. The servants around him flattered him and kept saying that he should be the next marquess. The story had also spread outside even reaching the influential head of the vassal families.

With this, Erwin arrived at the impression that him becoming the next marquess was the natural thing.

The only obstacles were the present Lord and the three people hostile to Erwin. But even for that problem, Erwin found a hint of a solution.

His meeting with Maria, the connections obtained by getting to know Lancelot Aqusmea and Charlotte Fatillas and more than anything his new relationship with the Crown Prince Arnold would strengthen his position.

Or so he thought, but then the day came when his favorable academy life had suddenly turned into a strange direction.

Arnold, who had always tried to avoid Ariel, had suddenly closed the distance between them. The effects of that move had instantly reached even Erwin.

One of them was the party that the Crown Prince held in order to introduce Ariel to his inner circle. The person invited for that was not Erwin, but Vincent.

Although Arnold's real intention was was, in fact, to show Rion the social position of Ariel and make him discard his feelings towards a person beyond his standing, Erwin had no way of knowing that.

He was under the impression that it was Ariel who instructed the prince to keep him away.

So he had to do something. He had to do something in order to separate Arnold from Ariel, so he could dislodge Vincent, who appeared to depend on that relationship, from the seat of the heir.

And now the time to achieve that had finally come.

"A way to separate Rion from sister?"

"Yeah. I think he is not a fitting person to be beside Ariel."

"Why is that?"

From Erwin's perspective, Rion was the thorn in the relationship of Arnold and Ariel, his existence was necessary. He couldn't just simply accept the words of Maria.

“Rion continuing in his role is not good for Arnold-sama.”

“That may be the case indeed, but... Just because of that...”

He couldn't tell her that doing so wouldn't be good for his aims. He had to somehow refuse while evading the issue.

“I think that the Crown Prince is taking this too seriously.”

“What do you mean?”

“Making someone who doesn't want to look at you glance your way is, in my opinion, impossible.”

“...So you think that when Rion is gone, his highness' interest in my sister will wane?”

“...I didn't say that much. This might be bad for your sister, but Arnold-sama is precious to me as well, so I want him to realize his true feelings.”

Although that was a rather cryptic answer, Erwin was able to infer some things. Maria was saying that she was actually the object of Arnold's true feelings. Erwin didn't know what did she base that assumption on. But certainly, during the ball, Arnold had shown signs of keeping his distance from Ariel. Although it was certain that something had happened, Erwin couldn't decide whether that change was definite or temporary.

“Crown Prince Arnold also desires this outcome.”

Because Erwin was still behaving indecisively, Maria stepped up the pressure. She started to imply that Arnold ended her relationship with Ariel and wanted to build a new one with Maria. And now they were asking for his cooperation to make that a reality.

“The Crown Prince...”

But still, Erwin felt unable to follow along. He was not only in different Academy year than Arnold, he had also always maintained a fixed distance from the Crown Prince. He was not able to just suddenly start a conversation with him and he didn't know whether Maria was saying the truth or merely making up a convenient story.

“This wouldn't be bad for you either Erwin. That person is... How should I put it... He

is very good at nudging people.”

Another difficult to understand statement coming from Maria. But here Erwin was also able to figure out what she was talking about. It didn’t even need saying, really. The one who was supporting Vincent from behind was unmistakably Rion. That being the case, and leaving aside the matter of Ariel, it would be beneficial for Erwin to separate Rion from Vincent.

“I do not know many things, but that Rion is unworthy of being a valet is indeed true.”

For the time being, he decided to follow Maria’s plans. At the very least, he judged that it would be an opportunity to change the current situation.

“Really?”

He finally took the bait. A smile has emerged on Maria’s face. If one looked carefully, it was an ugly smile full of avarice, but there was no one in this world that could see that clearly.

“He comes from the slums and he has blood on his hands after all.”

“So he was that kind of person? “

Although Maria displayed an exaggerated expression, in fact, she really was surprised. For Maria, a murderer was nothing but a low-life. Well, Rion was indeed rather wicked so she was not entirely wrong here.

“But even so, because he was a special existence to brother, I kept my lips sealed.”

“I know how you feel, but that can’t continue. It would be problematic for that kind of person to be standing beside the Crown Prince’s fiancée.”

“You’re right. “

Although she was trying to put an end to that marriage, she still used that as a reason to remove an enemy. Erwin felt like he grasped the true character of Maria. Although he was also one of her capture targets, in reality, Erwin was not really engrossed with her. He was only getting along with her because it seemed to him that it would prove beneficial to his relationship with the Crown Prince and the other marquess houses.

That situation arose because of her neglect to strengthen her relationships with her numerous capture targets as the World began to focus on the main events. And Maria failed to notice that.

Even if she did become aware of it now, the World would proceed in the direction it desired anyway. It was already disregarding the will of it's protagonist.

"Then, will you tell Arnold-sama about it?"

"Should I do it myself?"

"It would be better for the news to come from the person that knows the circumstances after all."

"That does seem right, but..."

Maria's intention was clear. She didn't want to be seen by Arnold as tattling on someone. If he was to tell Arnold himself though, Erwin decided it would be fine to just pretend to be worried about his sister.

With that, the Crown Prince became aware of Rion's history.

The World was moving. It was now trying to dispose of Rion who had been hindering its plans.

Chapter 29

A World No One Can Go Against

For Arnold, any information helping to separate Rion from Ariel was very much welcomed. Therefore, he was very pleased with Erwin's story.

Of course, that just meant he still had some lingering affection for Ariel, but none of the conspirators were concerned by that. After all who the Crown Prince had feelings for right now was irrelevant. Forces sharing the goal of dissolving the engagement between him and Ariel didn't care about such details as long as the situation headed towards their desired goal.

They were probably advised that the breakdown of the engagement would sadden Ariel and damage her relationship with Arnold beyond repair.

Considering all that, Arnold began to act just as all those people secretly wished for him to do. He contacted the Royal Bureau, the office of state holding jurisdiction over royal family marriage and public life in general, and using it conveyed his desire of wanting Rion dismissed to Marquess Windhill household. The official reason was unsuitability of a person with such a dubious background to be present in the inner circle of people around the future Queen.

The Bureau staff had no ulterior motives. For them removing a person born in the slum from the side of Crown Prince's fiancée was a natural thing.

Because the order came from the Royal Bureau, which served as the voice of the royal family, Lord Marquess Windhill was in no position to reject it. But he also had reservations about the desirability of having Rion beside his daughter. So he took advantage of that proclamation to remove Rion without earning the resentment of his daughter while pushing all fault onto the Bureau at the same time.

And, just like that, suddenly, the day arrived.

"I'm dismissed, huh?"

"Yeah, that's how it is. Just what on earth did you do?"

The one to inform Rion about the dismissal was Will and he was visibly displeased with the situation. But it was not due to sympathy for Rion. It was because now he would once again be assigned to serve Vincent.

“Was a reason given?”

“I was not made aware of one. But it is on request of Royal Bureau, so I guess you can figure it out, can’t you?”

So he noticed that since it was the Bureau’s proclamation, the whole matter must have been backed by the Crown Prince. Will had quite an excellent mind to be able to deduce that with the limited information he had at hand. If only his loyalties weren’t affected by his ambitions.

“I do have an idea, I am, however, surprised by the forcefulness of the reaction.”

Rion was aware now that he had earned the wrath of the Crown Prince. However, it was incomprehensible to him that a jealousy over a mere valet could lead to this kind of development.

“Well, that faint-hearted... Hey, stop making me say unnecessary things!”

“Ah no, you of your own accord...”

“Anyhow, you are dismissed. You are no longer to involve yourself with persons or matters of the House. Were you to disregard this warning, then as per discussions when you first arrived here...”

“...My life will be forfeit.”

“Well, yes. As a special consideration, you have been awarded a severance payment and a larger one than customary for someone working here between four and five years. Be grateful as you take it.”

“...Does this mean?”

Will’s words clearly carried a deeper meaning.

“Presume Ariel-sama learns of this, what do you think she would do? Wouldn’t she go all out to block your dismissal? “

“She would.”

Rion could affirm with confidence. And not just Ariel, even Vincent would never recognize his dismissal without a fight.

“However this time her selfishness wouldn’t be indulged. A proclamation from the Royal Bureau is like an order from the Crown, there is no refusing to that. But you know all this, don’t you?”

Will had Rion’s weak point firmly in his grasp. Rion wished for Arnold and Ariel’s marriage to proceed without obstructions as he thought that making it happen would let Ariel avoid her bad ending.

Incurring the wrath of the royal family would make the marriage as good as forfeit. Knowing that, Rion could not fight his dismissal.

Besides, he had already decided to part ways with Ariel. Although the day came before he even managed to act on his resolve.

“...I understand everything. I will depart immediately.”

“Do that. This is the money mentioned earlier. I advise against pretending you don’t need it. That kind of hubris might give people wrong ideas about your future plans and anger the Lord.”

Saying that, Will handed a bag of coins to Rion.

“...It seems that I have actually misunderstood you, Mr. Dirk.”

It was obvious that Will said all that in order to get Rion to accept the money.

“Misunderstood me? What did you have me for?”

“A self-centered person, with minuscule amounts of loyalty.”

“You were right to think that, I’m just not entirely heartless. Nothing more.”

Will would act as long as it was in the interest of his blood relatives.

“Is that the case? Well then, I just want to say that I have been in your care.”

“No need to bother.”

“Well then, I’ll be going now.”

“Goodbye”

Will, watching the back of departing Rion, exhaled deeply. His emotions, so far, were on the edge. Though he talked about the prospect light-heartedly, in reality, he didn’t know what would he do had Rion called for Ariel. He was entirely devoid of confidence of being able to defuse the situation that would have unfolded.

Like this, he was somehow able to do his duty, but thinking that created an opening in his mind.

“Ah, that’s right! There is something I’ve been wanting to ask!”

Shouted Rion after suddenly turning around.

“What is it?”

“Is Erwin-sama really a child of the Lord!?”

“...F-Fool, don’t just carelessly yell out those kinds of jests.”

A little moment of hesitation, that slight pause before Will answered gave Rion exactly what he wanted to know. Seeing his smile Will understood the magnitude of his error.

However, Rion didn’t let him off just with that.

“I have really misread you after all.”

“What are you...”

“You are loyal. It is just not immediately obvious what to, at the very least your own gains do not come first.”

“What are you talking about, bastard?”

“But isn’t that the truth? Mr. Will. Austin?”

“...How?”

Will wasn't able to keep his composure anymore and his face visibly paled. It was as good as confirming Rion's words.

“You see, I found out just recently. You are the third son of Viscount Austin. And I always wondered why did the Viscount look after Erwin-sama just like a guardian would?”

The head of the House Austin, Viscount Lange Austin had been supporting Erwin from the very beginning and, despite being a prominent vassal, was very overt at it. Originally, Rion was able to discover that Will was actually the third son of that Viscount.

It was not very complicated, he had a rough idea by the time he noticed the surprisingly close relationship between the two of them. Afterward, basing on that hunch, he simply found proof of barely hidden blood ties.

“.....A-Ahh, I am adopted, I have nothing to do with that house anymore.”

Will was trying to bluff his way out, however...

“If that's the case, then you are completely irrelevant to the special relationship between the Viscount and Erwin-sama, right?”

“.....”

Speechless. That was the only reaction that Will could offer. He didn't know why or how but he was certain that Rion knew something.

“Therefore, let me give you a warning. I will go quietly now. But do not do anything... Unnecessary. I would feel forced to reveal all I know in public then. We wouldn't want that.”

There was no one other than Erwin who could have brought about this situation. Although this was Arnold's intervention, Erwin had to be the one to provoke it without a doubt.

The real cause behind his dismissal – Rion could think of more than one of those, but none of them could be told to Ariel and Vincent. Furthermore, it would be detrimental

for House Windhill were it to be widely known that they employed a valet with dubious origins and ties to the slums.

The only outsiders with knowledge about his circumstances that wouldn't be harmed by it getting known were Erwin and his circle, and since he was the only person from that group with access to the Crown Prince, his culpability was clear.

Erwin, who didn't take part in the game before this had now started to act. Rion was able to gain a weapon that would put a stop to this. One of many he obtained to protect Ariel.

However, Will was unable to relay Rion's warning to Erwin.

Erwin was not aware of his true ancestry. It was due to fear that he might one day carelessly leak the truth and expose his faction's weakness.

In result, Rion's warning was not able to restrain Erwin's movements. Later, learning of that he would come to regret many things, but by then nothing could be done.

The World acted to get rid of Rion in order to reach its desired future. This was not something he was capable of resisting.

From this day onward, Rion's face would no longer be seen within the Academy grounds. And no matter how hard Vincent and Ariel searched for him, they would not unearth any clues about his whereabouts.

That being the case, it was not as if Rion forgot about the siblings completely. It was, actually, the opposite. Now, no longer constrained by his role as a valet, he planned to use any measures available for their interests.

However, there was something Rion did not know. He had no idea just how important was his existence for the siblings. And that if he stayed with them, they, just by being next to him, could become a force to bend the will of the World.

But, with this, the World have removed person causing the biggest disruption from the stage. All it had to do now was to shepherd the people remaining into the direction of its desire.

There was a dark mood looming over the Academy's cafeteria. Something of a regular occurrence recently, the source of which was widely known.

The person who could normally make the place liven up, Ariel, fell into a state of misery. And no one was able to do anything to heal her sadness. All here knew that the only person capable of such a feat was the root cause of the problem.

"Ariel, I understand your feelings, but to continue like this day after day..."

Even so, Vincent continued to try and comfort her. Even though he himself felt the touch of depression, Ariel's melancholy was so soul-crushing that it made him feel he could not afford to be like her.

But no matter how much he tried, she stayed silent with grim face and eyes devoid of life. To those students closest to her that appearance on the verge of tears caused their hearts to ache.

Worried about Ariel they went to town to search for Rion on their own but, all that effort resulted in no one finding any new leads. Truthfully there was no way for mere students to find him. After all, he withdrew to a place no honest person would usually want to enter, the Royal Capital's shadow, the slums.

"Should we search the slums?"

Finally, Vincent uttered the question he was avoiding for a long time.

And sure enough, Ariel, unresponsive until now, opened her eyes wide and stared at her brother.

"It will not be easy, though. We will not be able to use servants of the House. This, we would have to do on our own."

"...We will."

"Don't say it so casually, sister. Slums are very dangerous. When I met him there for the first time, he was on the Death's door. My life was under threat too. Who knows what could have happened to me had he not been there."

The fear he had felt back then turned into a sort of trauma for Vincent. This was one of the things that led him to trust Rion who had saved his life.

“It will be fine. Brother is not the same person.”

“Nevertheless...”

Vincent was not able to say that scary things don't get less scary no matter how much faith Ariel placed in him.

“Hey...”

As soon as their conversation finished they were called by a timid voice of a student from the nearby table.

“What is it?”

“ You would do best to keep away from the slums.”

“So you heard us. We are aware that place is dangerous, I got lost in that area as a child and narrowly avoided a terrible fate.”

“If that's true, why are you thinking of going back? The place is no better now.”

“...Because that's where Rion came from.”

He was uneasy about doing so, but Vincent still told them the truth. Rion's whereabouts were still completely unknown, so there was no longer need to hide it. If there were someone here who knew about the slums even a little, something useful might come up. Vincent decided to bet on that chance.

“Him?”

“Yes, him. He was the one who saved me back then when I got into huge trouble.”

“Really?”

Students hearing this story all knew Rion, they did not start thinking less of him now that they learned of his origins, they simply admired the impressive sounding tale of the meeting between him and Vincent. Getting to know this made them all the more

frustrated about his forced separation from the siblings.

Just as this story was spreading through the whole cafeteria, the worst possible person suddenly showed up.

“Ariel, why have you not showed up at the Lounge?”

It was the Crown Prince. Arnold’s sudden appearance caused everyone to look away and fall silent. The bad impression he made at the banquet still lingered among the commoners.

“Ariel! Answer me!”

Facing Ariel, who did not even try to answer the question, Crown Prince Arnold became impatient and raised his voice. It looked like he didn’t care that the opinion of him that the people in this room had would suffer as a result.

However, some here would sympathize with the prince. This wasn’t the first time he asked her to come, he repeated the invitation ever since Rion disappeared.

And Ariel ignored him every single time.

“Why must I go there, highness?”

“Because I requested it. Isn’t it natural for you to heed me?”

“I dislike that place greatly. It brings out the bad things in people.”

“What did you say?”

“Your Highness, prince Arnold, apart from you not one of the Lounge patrons wishes me to be there. That will not change no matter how often you summon me there. Therefore, please spare me the ordeal of staying in such a place.”

Normally, even if she was to try and say the same thing, she would exercise caution and restraint in her words. But today Ariel was in no state of mind for subtleties.

“You don’t like the Lounge but think this place is good?”

“There is no comparing these places.”

“That man will never return! Why do you still feel attachment to... This!?”

It would be cruel to call this a gaffe. It’s just that the addressee of those words was the worst possible one.

“...Oh? How, I wonder, would his highness ever know that?”

“I... What?”

Ariel splendidly snared the Crown Prince.

“It’s all so clear now. So it was all your highness’ doing. I thought it strange for the Royal Bureau to act as it did.”

“Ariel, don’t.”

Vincent who felt an uncomfortable aura gathering around Ariel raised his voice to try to stop her.

“Why... Why do this? Go so far? My time with Rion was fleeting already... Why snatch those remaining scraps away from me?”

“Ari, please! Say no more!”

Expecting words not to be enough, Vincent stood up and reached to gag her mouth with his hand. But his sister evaded him, and said all the fatal words that should have remained unspoken.

“Just because we are betrothed... You dare to claim the right to take my happiness away?”

“Wha... What... Did you say?”

Vincent decided to use this moment to try and bluff his way out of this disaster

“A Physician! Call a Physician!... Lady Ariel has departed her senses! “

Still, he needed all those present on board to ride along with this deceit.

Naturally, Ariel’s last statement was dangerous. The students who realized that

immediately stood up, some poised to truly call a doctor while others immediately headed to her side

True enough, Ariel was not in her normal condition. Just right after the female students came to support her, she fell down like a puppet with its strings cut and lost consciousness.

With this, the need for duplicity passed. The cafeteria erupted in an uproar as all the students started to worry about Ariel's condition.

The Crown Prince Arnold was the only one left out. The surrounding was a riot due to Ariel and no one spared any attention for him. And while certain students gave him an occasional look, none of those were favorable.

All the students present were now aware that it was Arnold who brought despair to Ariel.

And Arnold was once again reminded that Ariel's feelings were directed not at him but at Rion.

The events might have veered off course along the way, but everything arrived at the same conclusion. As the World headed towards its desired destination, everything was steadily proceeding according to its will.

Chapter 30

Event: The Denunciation of the Villainess

The entire school seemed to be wrapped in an uneasy atmosphere.

Rumors that the Crown Prince secretly used royal family's influence to force a dismissal of Rion swiftly spread among the students.

The students of minor noble rank, who built a rapport with Rion before, disagreed with Arnold's methods and started to develop a mistrust towards him and the three marquess rank lordlings close to him.

From the start of his Academy life there was dissatisfaction with how he treated his fiancée, Ariel, but until now that was actively mollified by Rion. But now, with Rion's disappearance and Ariel's depression caused by it, that discontent could be contained no longer.

Of course, since the people causing the unrest belong to royalty and high aristocracy, the dissidents could not voice their opinions in the open. They kept their views low key, only exchanging them with other sympathetic individuals.

But the thing with unrest is, that once enough of it accumulates, it seeks for an outlet. And the easiest target to vent on was Maria, whose social station carried little weight.

"Doing things like this... Do you think you can get away with it?"

Maria, with her desk turn upside down in front of her and her belongings strewn on the floor around it, muttered in annoyance.

"Hmm? I'll be quite alright, after all, I have no fiancée you can steal"

Unyielding before Maria's harsh aura the female student fired back a reply full of sarcasm.

"You did this, didn't you!?"

“I know nothing about all this. I just spoke from the perpetrator’s likely point of view.”

“Don’t play dumb!”

Maria had a different atmosphere around her compared to when she was being chastised by the noble students. Her opponent this time was a student of an even lower pedigree than her and, on top of that, these chastisements would result in no future gains for her.

In the game, the commoner students would cheer up the protagonist as she was receiving the harassment from students from nobility and were generally supportive allies. However, in this world, Maria has splendidly earned their animosity.

Although the improved relationship between them and the Windhill siblings was partly to blame, Maria was also at fault for ignoring all the events that would improve her relationship with female students as she focused on capturing the males.

“Do you have any proof to accuse me?”

“What?”

“Pointing fingers at other people without evidence is a horrible thing to do. But I guess I should expect no better from someone that got another House’s servant dismissed for no reason.”

More sarcasm, but this time it wasn’t aimed solely at Maria.

“You! Do you think you’ll be forgiven for saying things like that?”

“What did I say?”

“What did you say? Did you just not criticize the Crown Prince!?”

“Eh? Are you serious right now? How foolish. The Crown Prince is a gentleman who would never resort to such cheap tactics.”

To those who overheard this, these words clearly hid even more sarcasm pointed at Arnold, who had to resort to cheap tactics to get rid of Rion.

“How dare you...”

For Maria, getting chastised by the students of lower birth was considerably irritating. The harassment from the noble students could be called cute in comparison. Although both were similar and involved things like hiding her belongings or getting her dirty, the nobles admitted their culpability in one way or another.

They would even sneer at the seemingly troubled Maria. Although that also was to make fun of her, being able to see who the perpetrators were somehow put her mind at ease.

She understood that when the chastisements by the commoner students started.

The commoners would never reveal the perpetrators. The female student who looked and acted like the culprit might indeed not be playing dumb. There was a good chance that she actually didn't know anything about who had done it.

Now she neither knew who her enemy was nor how many enemies did she have in total. She found that uncertainty unnerving.

Furthermore, these chastisements had no connection to the game whatsoever. No matter how much she tried to put up with them, they would never be connected to the events of her capture targets.

If there was anything they could lead to, that would be...

"Stop this immediately! If you continue this behavior you'll find House Aquasmea as your enemy."

... More instances of Lancelot, whose route was already concluded, protecting her. Usually, his appearance caused, the female students to withdraw. However, it was hard not to notice that those girls looked at him with scorn.

Suddenly the number of female students remaining in the classroom fell greatly. Even the ones bearing no ill-will towards Maria felt displeased about the current situation.

It was because the ambiance made it harder for them to concentrate on their studies.

Maria knew that in time, this would turn into another animosity.

"...Lancelot. I don't believe that aggravating them further is helpful."

“Really, Charlotte? What would be your solution?”

“Mine?... Talk to them, reach an understanding.”

“You want us to kneel before them!?”

“I said no such thing! I am just advising dialog!”

“That’s the same as admitting defeat.”

“Oh, and how did you reach that conclusion!?”

The moderate Charlotte and the hard-line Lancelot. Their opinions failed to find common ground.

“I think we should eliminate the source of all this instead.”

And there was another hardliner, even more extreme than Lancelot. It was Erwin. If there was someone taking delight from the whole ordeal it would be him.

Although this was a conflict between aristocrats and the commoners, if one was to trace it to the source, it would inevitably lead them back towards the Crown Prince and the Windhill siblings.

And Erwin was someone that would never miss a chance to knock those two off their perch.

“How? That requires accusing a member of a Marquess House of a crime. It can’t be done without a good justification.”

“Justification? Don’t we have enough reasons? Disrespect of the Crown Prince, disrespect of Maria... Pretty much an affront to the whole royal family...”

“You think to use rumors surrounding Maria... These still require evidence, though.”

Ten years ago, when the Crown Prince had just turned a year old, the country was shaken by an unbelievable crime, the kidnapping of a newly-born princess.

A relentless manhunt that followed turned up no leads about the child’s whereabouts and no clues about perpetrators of the crime giving the incident an aura of mystery.

These days the kingdom was full of rumors naming Maria as the true missing princess. It was said that the Queen, catching a glance of Maria, inadvertently called her the princess. But that left the question of why nobody had confirmed or disproved this yet.

“Is there no way around this?”

The person Erwin asked was Arnold. However, the only reply given was a taciturn shake of the head.

“Is that so...”

“Really... Why doesn't his majesty try to resolve this question? This could be the return of the missing princess, I can't think of a more important matter.”

“...There's no way to conclusively prove it's her.”

Lancelot's question was answered by Arnold himself.

“No way...? But I heard that Maria's features are strikingly similar to the missing princess'.”

“It's comparing a grown lady to a newborn child. All that's unquestionable is the hair and eye color. It is not possible to acknowledge Maria just with that.”

“Isn't black hair very rare, though?”

Black hair was a proof of excellent affinity for magic. Leaving aside the reasons for that belief, it was such a rare hair color that thinking this way was not unreasonable.

“Don't misunderstand, I do feel bad for Maria. However, this is not the first time. Others claimed to be the princess in the past. All of them were frauds, obviously. But that caused Mother great pain every time it happened. And now that the wounds were almost healed, Maria appears... I can't fault Father for being cautious.”

“Quite understandable. No wonder the matter looks impossible.”

“We are drifting far from the subject. Weren't we talking about dissolutions of his highness' betrothal?”

Again, the moderate Charlotte interfered with the conversation. Her views aside, dissolving the engagement had been her objective from the very beginning. This intervention was just made in order to guarantee that happens.

“We were. But justifying this is as hard as accusing Ariel of a crime.”

The proposed marriage was political, to break it off they would need reasons good enough to satisfy Lord Windhill. Cancelling without a good enough reason would instantly raise great mistrust in House Windhill towards the crown.

“That... I honestly never wanted to be the one saying this, but...”

Erwin spoke as if struggling with something.

“Do you know something that might help?”

“I do... However... I have no proof... But...”

Erwin continued to speak even though it looked as if it was a hard thing for him to say.

“What is it? We can’t be sure unless we hear it.”

“The relationship between sister and that valet... There were rather ugly rumors about them...”

Although Arnold stayed silent, Erwin didn’t miss the twitch of his eyebrows in response to this.

“This is not news”

Lancelot’s face openly questioned what was he about. After all the suspicions about the intimacy of Ariel’s and Rion’s relationship were the main reason the cancellation of the engagement was on the agenda.

“It is not what you think. This rumor says that back when the two of them resided in the mansion, they have already...”

“What are you trying to say?”

“...They were rumored to be in a mature relationship.”

“...Wh-What was this?”

Lancelot's eyes opened wide in surprise. Unsurprisingly, this was way beyond his expectations.

Arnold, in turn, went stiff hearing this, his rigid body not moving a muscle.

“That... Is hard to believe. How old were those two back then?”

“Ten, perhaps eleven?”

“Impossible. They were just kids.”

It wasn't, in fact, unseen for ten-year-old children to marry. But Charlotte herself was like a child when it came to matters of love and this statement showed that.

“Nevertheless, there were multiple times when sister visited Rion's room after dark.”

“...If that was to be true.”

“Lancelot? This cannot possibly be true, you know.”

“So what? We can have it investigated anyway. There are people for those kinds of tasks.”

“Tell me you are kidding?”

Although Lancelot said this jovially, it would be an unfathomable humiliation for any girl forced to undergo such a thing. That was a method that Charlotte, a lady herself, would never agree with.

“If these allegations are confirmed we will add them to our complaint about her conduct. We have to file the complaint anyway, and soon. Arnold needs to hasten the matter too or we won't make it before preparations for the marriage begin.”

The preparation for a royal family's wedding took a considerable amount of time. Coordinating with the invitees from the neighboring kingdoms and even just sending letters of invitation to them would take months. Arnold's desire to hold the marriage right after graduation had already been made public. It wouldn't be strange for the preparations to start immediately.

“In that case, let’s just proceed with the complaint we prepared already, without the part about an affair.”

“No, we will put it in. So that an examination would be arranged. There are also grave doubts about the nature of the relationship between the lady and the valet – that should be enough.”

“Stop this! Arnold-sama, are you going to just let this happen!?”

Charlotte and Lancelot, when the two of them couldn’t come to an agreement, they would defer to Arnold.

But the response that Charlotte wished for, didn’t come this time. The doubts that Arnold’s heart was harboring were too big. His will lost to the urge to know the truth.

And that was how things developed just as Maria wished without her having to say a single word. With Rion gone, there was no one to obstruct the World’s plots any longer.



Ariel would never agree to have her chastity examined. The mere fact of it being doubted was already a huge slap to her face given her social standing and life of exemplary conduct expected of a fiancée of the Crown Prince.

Erwin knew that and it was exactly why he brought up a baseless rumor about her and Rion.

The results were as he expected. Ariel flat out refused to be examined and the official report of that matter could only state that fact. The way it was written made this refusal look like an implied admission of guilt.

There was a story making rounds in the royal castle, that as a retaliation for the examination attempt Ariel was scheming with the support of her brother, Vincent. They were said to incite the commoners and agitate against the crown.

That came from a complaint note filed by Lancelot, which he formulated with Erwin and their witness, Maria.

The extreme language of that report was to be expected given Erwin’s desire to depose

his half-siblings. However, neither Lancelot nor Maria was invested so much.

Lancelot certainly did wish for the fall of Vincent. He definitely didn't want Vincent to stand next to him as someone of equal rank. But his aims were limited to stripping Vincent of his birthright and breaking off Ariel's engagement.

Maria, on the other hand, didn't aim for anything in particular. She already knew the ending. The betrothal would be dissolved and Ariel would end up married off to a lord of a certain distant land. Vincent would lose his titles, his fate after that was not discussed in the game.

So with two of them only expecting so much from the complaint, they never thought that it would blow up to such a big thing., Even Erwin, despite actively plotting the downfall of his siblings, was surprised.

"Ariel Woodville. Heed us. Is what was written in this report the truth?"

The people that suddenly showed up at the Academy to cross-examine Ariel belonged to the Royal Guard's investigation branch, they were a rare sight not only in the capital but even at the royal castle.

The branch was tasked with exposing the irregularities within chivalric orders, as well as crushing those who would plot to oppose the crown.

They would not shy from any means, even the cruelest ones, in pursuit of their duty. No person alive, regardless of guilt, dared to wish to get acquainted with them.

Their presence meant that the kingdom officials accepted Lancelot's complaint at face value.

"I believe them to be a mixture of fact and untruths."

Ariel, facing the investigators was, as usual, showing no signs of being perturbed.

"In that case, which parts are true?"

"...Before I answer, I have a question of my own."

"Regardless of your background, you are under suspicion now. Your usual rights no longer apply, you would do well to keep that in mind."

It would be more accurate to say that she had none. The investigation branch was feared so much exactly because they could investigate anyone without limits, with exception of the King himself.

“My question is crucial to establishing the truth.”

Ariel showed no signs of faltering. This made Lancelot's group, that gathered immediately after hearing of the interrogation, very relieved.

If it was this Ariel, she would be able to properly de-escalate this situation. They looked for solace in those self-centered thoughts.

“Ask. We promise no answer.”

“If I was to deny all the allegations, would you withdraw?”

“We cannot answer that question”

There was almost no one who found that answer strange. If the investigators were just going to back down after hearing a denial, there would've been no need for them to come in the first place. But they also should have said exactly that to Ariel's question.

“I see... Would it be correct to assume that your investigation is limited to me and my brother only?”

“That... Is not a question we can answer either.”

The investigator, who until now had consistently kept an expressionless face, wavered slightly.

The meaning of this was clear. The investigation was not limited to the siblings. Ariel began to deeply ponder who else could the investigators be after.

“If you're done asking, we'd have you provide some answers now. Are the contents of this complaint accurate?”

Investigator suddenly demanded an answer as if to derail her train of thoughts. His face was visibly flustered.

“Ah, yes... You wanted to know whether that was truth or not...”

Ariel was clearly stalling for time. What was the investigator flustered about? She really wanted to learn that.

“Give us an answer, if you please. Our time is not unlimited.”

The gaze of the investigator moved slightly, an opening born from impatience. Ariel didn't miss that. She was able to roughly grasp the aim of the investigation now. However, that left her troubled struggling for a good solution.

She was considering who should she protect.

“Lady Ariel, we demand a prompt answer. Be honest and open with us, isn't aiding justice also a noble's duty?”

“A noble's duty...”

That actually gave another hint to Ariel. The worst possible hint in this situation. But anyone that knew the truth about this World would conclude that this was also its intervention.

“Why hesitate? All we require is honest answers. You wouldn't want to lose your status as my fiancée now, would you?”

Even the Crown Prince lost patience and intervened in the hearing. All to make Ariel voice the desired thing, not the one Arnold looked for, the one the World did.

“...My status.”

This was something that Ariel was ill at ease with for some time now. She not only came to desire the cancellation of her betrothal to Arnold but she even wanted to throw away her social position.

“Enough of this, answer me!”

Again the voice of the investigator that sought an answer. And facing that demand, Ariel slowly opened her mouth.

“...Yes. Everything was my doing.”

“What!?”

The investigator that was pressuring Ariel for an answer opened his eyes in surprise.

“I was the instigator. The harassment of Maria, the disaffection towards the Crown Prince, all that happened on my orders.”

“...Is this a serious answer?”

“Why do you think it is not?”

Ariel answered with a smile on her face. She had resolved herself, no, it might've been the smile of someone who had discarded all burdens.

“Do you, perhaps, misunderstand our purpose here?”

“Who do you take me for? I am familiar with all the institutions of the country.”

There was no one else could boast that kind of knowledge at such age. The reason why Ariel was able to do this was due to her sense of duty as a Queen Candidate.

As the investigator realized this his face turned cloudy. It was the first human-like expression he had shown in a long time.

“As a result of these crimes you are facing heavy charges.”

“Oh? Just for a bit of chastisement? I would never expect that.”

“Things are more serious than this. Disrespecting the crown, upsetting social order. That is high treason.”

“Oh... Did the country really change so much? To call petty chastisements treason?”

“We offer you a chance. If your statement before was a joke, say so.”

“I am guilty of all those things. That is the truth.”

Even this opportunity offered by the investigators was ignored by Ariel. But they decided to give her one more chance to change her mind.

“I hope you are aware that with this admission your brother, Vincent Woodville, will be punished as well.”

“...Brother had no involvement with this.”

Hearing the name of her brother come up made the composure on Ariel’s face momentarily vanish.

“Proper investigation will answer this question.”

“My brother is unrelated to this matter! I carried all this on my own!”

“If you want to protect your brother, cease jesting and speak the truth. You know this is all it takes.”

“...I... Am speaking the truth. I am faithful to my aristocratic pride.”

Although she looked cornered giving the answer, she said the last part clearly. What she should be protecting... Ariel was unable to betray the person who taught her that.

“I see... Guards, arrest Ariel Woodville.”

“Is this really alright?”

“Do it. That is our duty.”

With investigators flanking her, Ariel was taken out of the Academy. At roughly the same moment Vincent was arrested at a separate venue. He made the same decision Ariel did.

That concluded the last event of the Academy arc. The plot has now safely reached the conclusion that the World desired.

Chapter 31

Repentance Comes Too Late

Ariel was detained by the investigation branch inquisitors. That left Crown Prince Arnold and his peers standing still in blank amazement at this unexpected turn of events.

But one person in the group did not fully appreciate the situation – Maria.

“One problem taken care of at last.”

And she offered another inappropriate statement. The gaze of the surrounding people all of a sudden focused on Maria and it was not just the Crown Prince’s group, all of the students present were suddenly looking at her.

And all of those looks were far from favorable too, clearly, there were numerous individuals glaring at her with hostility.

“...Did I say something bad?”

Maria was puzzled why everyone was looking at her like that. After all, this was a predetermined event concluding with an expected outcome.

“Do you not realize what you just said? Are you kidding?”

Charlotte exploded in anger at Maria’s attitude. This was not because she was angry at her, but because of anxiety towards the situation that she made.

“I... Am not really...”

“...Then what!?”

“I... What could have made you so angry Charlotte-san?”

“...Enough. I don’t want to speak with a person like you anymore.”

Screaming seemed to have no impact on Maria. Due to this, she could not serve as a good outlet for anger. Charlotte decided to vent on an inanimate object instead, aggressively sitting down on a chair in a completely unladylike manner. After that, she turned her back on Maria held her head in her hands.

“Maria, it is likely now that those two will receive capital punishment.”

Lancelot explained in place of Charlotte. Just like usual.

“Death penalty? That will never happen.”

At the very least that would not be Ariel’s sentence. Maria was certain of that.

“The investigator called her crimes high treason. The law has only one penalty for that.”

“But once they look into the situation, they will know it’s just a misunderstanding.”

Maria thought this should have never been called treason, but the reality was not so nice.

“Why would they do that?”

“Huh?”

“She said that everything in the complaint letter was true. She admitted to all of it. So this is the truth, she and her brother will be charged based on it.”

“Lancelot, what are you saying? The content of that complaint was...”

“Based on the results of our investigation. Pure facts.”

Erwin interrupted Maria mid-sentence. They could not afford any careless remarks with other students around.

Maria was not stupid. She quickly understood his intentions.

“...So, those two will receive capital punishment?”

“It is likely.”

“...I see.”

Ending the conversation with no qualms showed Maria’s heartlessness. To her, people of this world were no more than NPCs. If the siblings were to die, then that’s just how it had to be. She was unable to think about this situation in any other way.

“And is your highness really fine with this!?”

Charlotte was not. Even though prompted by her feelings towards the Crown Prince, she acted to vilify Ariel, deep down she was a good person. Now she felt a crushing weight of guilt.

“Nobody but father can interfere with the Royal Guard Investigation Branch affairs.”

“Then, let’s ask His Majesty.”

“What...”

“Huh?”

“What should I ask of father?”

“Clemency, of course.”

“Let’s say that is granted, what then? Loss of peerage and banishment? Hmm... But if that’s the case maybe life internment in a prison tower would be better...”

Charlotte regained herself due to the awareness of the wrong they had committed together. But that did not mean others did too. Some of them, by averting their eyes from the truth, lost a part of themselves in return.

“...Your... Highness?”

“...But then, the procedures at the prison tower are troublesome, it would be hard to visit them even if I wanted. It might be best if they were sentenced to slavery instead...”

Arnold drifted out of the conversation and, looking troubled, started to mumble to himself. Charlotte noticed the spark of sanity fading from his eyes.

“Arnold-sama?!”

“...She cannot be banished. Were that to happen she’s sure to join that pest, wherever he is. I’ll never let that come to pass.”

He was afraid of the consequences and he ran from that fear into the convenient distraction of jealousy. And he wasn’t, of course, aware he was doing it.

“That couldn’t be...”

The goal of this World was to achieve its intended shape. Therefore it cared little for the future fate of anyone not necessary for that goal.

For the World, its inhabitants were just puppets to be used for furthering its aims.



Lancelot, one of those responsible for vilification of Ariel, did not, in the end, put any effort into resolving the situation, to protect himself from the fallout. Neither did he know any details of what exactly was the Crown Prince busying himself with these days.

Although with time, some of the damage had healed and the atmosphere in their group was no longer tense, the impact of recent events was just too strong and trying to discuss them with Arnold made Lancelot feel like he was prodding a festering wound.

So he did nothing, simply spending days waiting for time to pass.

In contrast, there was a person that wouldn’t let himself be stuck in a deadlock like that. Someone who would act vigorously and do anything to save Vincent and Ariel.

“Long time no see, Lady Charlotte. Or am I, perhaps, being over-familiar now?”

“...No, you’re not. You look fine too, Rion.”

Rion showed up before her out of the blue. His objective was painfully easy to understand and Charlotte was not able to stay calm.

“Did your eyesight get worse while I was gone?”

“Huh?”

"I look fine? Like hell I do. How could I with how things are?"

"You... You're right."

"But milady looks rather pale too. That's a shame, lady Charlotte has quite a beautiful face usually."

Although his tone was polite, the current Rion is not the one that Charlotte thought she knew. Just by facing his impolite cold glare she felt rising dread. He carried an aura of ruthlessness around him and compounded by her feelings of guilt that made him look like a completely different person in her eyes.

"...What brings you to me?"

"I would have your assistance in saving the lives of lord Vincent and lady Ariel."

"I can't..."

"Wouldn't it be unfair for someone like you, a person from the esteemed House Fatillas, to just do nothing even though you are the mastermind behind the downfall of the siblings?"

"The mastermind... That would be Lancelot, he more than the others, drove that plan on."

Charlotte calmly pushed the responsibility on Lancelot and the others, the friendship between them was already dead.

"But the matters raised in the complaint, those you were directly involved in."

"Was I now?"

"Hmm, I was certain that... Ah, right, I see, that was supposed to be a secret."

"..."

Charlotte understood what Rion was implying. All the blood drained from her face again leaving it ghastly pale.

"All those things lady Charlotte did, wasn't that disgrace to the Royal Family and high

treason?”

“...Why do you know this?”

“Know what exactly? That two people will die due to false charges? Or that you were the instigator behind Maria’s harassment?”

“...All of it.”

Charlotte stopped playing dumb. Faced with Rion’s attitude, she didn’t have the confidence to carry on with the act.

“I had someone tell me everything about the former in detail. As for the latter, I knew for a long time now. After all, that issue was putting lady Ariel in bad light, it was my duty to investigate.”

“But, as a result...”

“These false charges can be lifted. Milady can make it happen.”

“I do not have that kind of power.”

“Ah? Shall I help you out with evidence of my own?”

“Evidence?...”

“I am no longer tied to House Windhill, I can and will use any means necessary to help my former masters.”

The mood surrounding Rion was steadily getting more and more nasty. He now looked the part of someone controlling the underside of the society from the slums.

“...What are you planning?”

“I will... Approach every female student you incited to pester Maria and... Get them to recall everything they might know regarding this matter.”

“S-surely not?”

Rion said it in a roundabout way but his point was clear. He would even go as far as

kidnapping witnesses and forcing them to confess.

“Hmm? There are so many ways to make a girl talk, you know. “

“...That is a crime.”

It's too late for her to say that now, after all, what Rion was doing to Charlotte, was clearly coercion. Rion was already performing a criminal act even before she said so.

“Haven't you heard me? Any. Means. Necessary. If need arises, I would even hear the words directly from your lips.”

“ ... ”

They were now in a little diner in an indistinct back alley. There were many customers present when they entered the shop but now there was no one left. Charlotte cursed her own foolishness for obediently following him when he asked to talk somewhere discreet.

“Kidding. I still have something for you to do. It would be inconvenient to render you useless.”

Even though he said it was a joke, that did not ease Charlotte's anxiety. On the contrary, her shoulders trembled when she considered the meaning behind his last words.

“Besides, I already obtained evidence that you would not be able to refute.”

Rion was certain that, with this much, she would fall for it but...

“...All you have is useless.”

Charlotte's heart was stronger than what Rion expected. Even though he picked the easiest target by his estimation, she was still an aristocrat from a Marquess lineage. Rion secretly admired her conduct.

Even so, he had no intention of letting things finish like this.

“I do not plan to put it before courts of justice. It will be of much more use in the hands of Lord Marquess Windhill.”

“...Then saving the two would be...”

“At the very least, you will get to keep them company. Furthermore, just because you said it would not save them doesn’t mean I would just give up. But how about you, being dragged into this, do you have someone that would even try to aid you?”

“...”

Charlotte could not answer. Lancelot could no longer be relied on. Her parents would certainly act, but if it looked like the family was to be damaged, they were as likely to cut her off as to help. Good of the House trumped any individual. Charlotte, an aristocrat through and through, knew that perfectly well.

“Well, are you convinced yet?”

“...It’s impossible.”

“That’s a no then, huh?”

“That’s not it! It’s just impossible!”

These words of Charlotte, unlike the ones up to now, felt authentic. Rion could sense that and it gave him a bad feeling.

“...Why is it impossible?”

“The petition for clemency is already in motion, with or without my involvement. But even if it succeeds, its impact will be negligible.”

“Can you elaborate?”

“I underestimated my parents. No, I underestimated the marquess houses.”

“They... Are using this case for political gain, aren’t they?”

This was a unique chance to bring down House Windhill. It wouldn’t be odd for other two major Houses to think that.

“No, this is not a political struggle. This matter arose from a nonsensical letter of complaint. They cannot afford this to become public knowledge. If they did so, the

blame would rebound onto all three of them.”

The Royal Guard Investigation Branch acted on a spurious complaint. But it acted with full awareness of that fact, only intending to snare the instigators once the charges were exposed for the worthless slander they were.

In reality, the only ones who wanted the complaint to be made public were those on the side of the accused.

“...So they stubbornly want to legitimize this complaint.”

“The full force of all marquess rank Houses is maneuvering in the shadows. No one can stop them, not even me, a daughter of one of those families.”

Explanations wouldn't be heard. In reality, if all the major Houses engaged in intrigue at the same time, the only force capable of stopping that would be the King. And even he would hesitate before attempting that. That's why the answer to a question “Who was able to go to such lengths to save the siblings?” was – nobody.

And on top of that, there was a significant chance the King would help the other two Houses in order to make them indebted to him.

“...Damn it!”

Thus Rion realized his own failure. Because the treatment of the siblings improved greatly, he underestimated the World thinking himself perfectly prepared for the arrival of this day. But the World, as if sneering at him, displayed far greater power than Rion anticipated.

Just to strike Vincent and Ariel into the depth of misery.

“Rion...”

Rion bit on his lip strongly enough to draw blood while tears were streaming from his eyes. The person that was, until just now, threatening Charlotte now stood in front of her trembling with fear and crying.

Charlotte's eyes witnessed a sad figure of someone who gave everything to protect what was precious to them and yet still ended up stricken with despair as all his effort proved to just not be enough

“Still... I can't give up.”

“I understand your feelings, but nothing will change, whatever you do.”

“Even if that is so, I will do what I can.”

“...I see.”

No matter what was said, Rion's determination would not change. Even in such a situation, Charlotte envied Ariel.

“In the end, I only have one thing to ask of you.”

“One thing?”

Again, Charlotte's heart filled with wariness.

“The punishment facing those two, please tell me everything you learn about it. I don't care how trivial it is.”

“...If you wish. But how to find you?”

“Please come to this place again. When you do so, someone will approach you. Tell him everything.”

“Rion, are you...”

Charlotte was surprised to find out that someone else was helping Rion from the shadows but didn't yet realize that Rion took control of a considerable share of the capital's pleasure quarters and was a bigwig of the underground society.

But then she hadn't ever got a chance to know either, because Rion's existence was a top secret that only a few uninvolved in the organized crime knew of.

As promised, after a while Charlotte came back bringing news about the siblings impending punishment.

Vincent was to be publicly executed for the crime of high treason. Ariel would not only be stripped of her noble birth but also sold into slavery. Charlotte came to pass on that information but she found the punishment so cruel that she could hardly put it into

words.



Quite a distance from the main street, there was a certain building. It was fairly large but otherwise unremarkable, with nothing indicating its purpose. There was a muscular man at the entrance checking all the visitors strictly. No doubt, this was a special place.

Hardly anyone knew what went on inside apart from those involved in running it, wealthy merchants and nobles.

What they were seeking here was slaves, this was the Kingdom's official slave market.

A young man, obviously ill-fitting here, arrived at the entrance. The veil covering half of his face failed to mask his attractive features.

As he was thinking whether to go in or not an elegantly dressed man came out of the building to greet him. This implied that the youth had rather high a social standing because the manager wasn't in habit of personally receiving ordinary nobles. Not that the nobles wanted that in the first place, they preferred not to bring attention to the fact they were buying slaves.

Today, an incredible item that everyone wanted to get their hands on, for purposes both good and ill, was announced to the crowd. The slave market, at this moment, was much more lively than usual.

"Manager, is this place always like this?"

The young man asked in astonishment.

"No, normally we don't have so many customers. It is because today is special."

"This means all of them are aiming for the same thing, huh?"

"That is so. Such an event is not even once-a-decade, it's once-in-a-century occurrence for our establishment."

"But it is not unheard of, huh?"

“According to the records, something like this most recently happened nearly one hundred years ago. That was the sale of the wicked, country-ruining beauty, Françoise. Your highness... Ah, I’m sorry, surely milord knows the details?”

The manager changed the way he was referring to the man in a panic, just in case he was traveling incognito, but it seemed to be a useless precaution here.

Every noble should, and probably would, know the face of their own country’s Crown Prince. It was not something that you could conceal just by keeping your mouth shut.

“She who tricked the two princes and caused a fierce fight for succession?”

This was the Crown Prince Arnold. He even knew a story from a hundred years ago.

“To be exact, she was leading the princes by the noses and having them fight each other but... The official records are just like milord says. “

“ ... ”

The conflict between the two princes that was fierce enough to divide the whole country, When Prince Arnold heard that it was caused by a spat over a woman, he was stunned.

“She was said to be that beautiful, and with her peerless beauty being on sale that time, it seemed to cause quite a commotion.”

“I see.”

“As expected, today won’t match up to that time but this is the most lively sale ever since I became the manager. I am a little excited to host the bidding that will come.”

All slaves were purchased in an open auction, the more competitors for a particular one were present, the more intense the bidding would become, and the more the final price would rise. Because this was an opportunity for a new sales record, probably the highest the manager would ever experience, he could not hide his own excitement.

“What will the final price be, manager?”

“It would be unfair for me to disclose such a thing...”

“A rough estimate is fine.”

“Well, a little guess won’t hurt. I heard that the slave has a reserve price of two thousand gold coins.”

“Wha?! Two thousand?!”

It was a price that even the Prince found surprising. With two thousand gold, a commoner could live in luxury for the rest of his life. Or it was enough to support two thousand commoners for a lifetime. On the scale of a kingdom, it would, unsurprisingly, not be enough to support the whole chivalric order but it would equal a yearly budget of the royal guards.

“I was also surprised when I heard the price, but the vendor probably judged that if one paid that much, they would earn what they paid for.”

“...Are there customers present with that kind of money?”

“Not many, more than half of those present are here just to marvel at the prices. Furthermore, when the remainder hear the opening bid, most of them will turn into mere spectators.”

“I see...”

Arnold might have looked somewhat relieved that there would be scant competition, but that did not make two thousand gold coins any less outrageous of a price. In the end, regardless of actual value, the situation was that the final bid was expected to be twice his budget. What troubled him was simply how to make up for the shortfall.

It did not matter how unreasonable the eventual price was to be, Arnold would still win this auction. He would make Ariel kneel in front of him to repent for not paying him any attention. And then he would make her dedicate everything to him as a slave for the rest of her life.

Keeping that twisted desire in his heart, Arnold was waiting for Ariel to show up on the stage.

But Arnold’s wish wouldn’t come true. Ariel, who should have been the greatest merchandise of the slave market, did not appear that day.

Chapter 32

Vincent Woodville

That day, the mood of the royal capital was full of strange and complex undercurrents.

Two weeks had passed since the execution was announced. Vincent Woodville of House Windhill would die today.

Some people were looking forward to the execution as a spectacle of sorts. Some people held antipathy towards the idea of showing a person's death in public. Some were excited to watch such a thing for the first time since reaching adulthood. And finally there were those who knew what was actually going on and they were furrowing their eyebrows.

The inhabitants of the royal capital made for a cocktail of those complicated feelings causing the city to carry a mood it didn't usually experience.

However, those aware of the situation knew there was more to the mood than just that. They could feel a faint smell of trouble mixed with everything else.

They knew that it was caused by all the suspicious maneuvering that could be noticed ever since the execution was announced up to this day.

The hearts of the inhabitants who sensed the storm brewing could not calm down.



A single youth rushed into a certain building in a back alley.

"How did it go?"

Others, waiting inside, asked almost instantly.

"As before. Still possible to slip through the security net and get close."

"Which means problems will come later when we get to securing lord Vincent and

safely escaping the scene, eh?”

Rescuing Vincent was the objective of this group. They have been in motion for the last two weeks preparing things within the capital.

“As expected drastic measures are unavoidable. But once we break through the security cordon on the way out there will be multiple escape paths in the city.”

“Agreed. Preparations there are under way already.”

“Success is not certain, though. And it’s very likely we’ll suffer casualties in the process.”

Suddenly one of them interjected with words of caution. There was no such thing as a perfect plan. His concerns were reasonable, but ill-timed, that was not a comment to be made just as your group was to move out.

“Yes. We know.”

“Is the danger really worth it?”

He actually wanted this answer from the start. This man was unconvinced of the necessity, for him and his comrades, to brave danger for saving Vincent.

“I struggled with this too, you know. But no aristocrat before was free of prejudice towards commoners like him.”

“So I’ve heard. But he lost his title, his family, and his backing. Isn’t he essentially powerless?”

“There is more to lord Vincent’s strength than the quality of his background. He’s someone that should be standing above the common crowd.”

“This. This is what confuses me. After all the rumors of him being a failure...”

Due to him never coming into contact with Vincent, there was a discrepancy between the way he and others evaluated the young Windhill.

“There are two types of exceptional people. One has the strength to make everyone around him loudly recognize his prowess, the other has the strength to silently carry

the burdens of those that surround him.”

“And Vincent-sama is the latter?”

“Yes. He had a miserable side to him, but that only added to his charm. Lord Vincent is a person that makes others think “I want to do something for this person.” Once you meet him, you’ll understand immediately.”

“...I see. Let’s do it then”

The man gave in fairly easily. It looked like there was no one in the group that seriously thought of stopping the plan.

“So, are you on board? “

“I never seriously wanted to stop you, all this was only to check your resolve before we go.”

“Heh, no need to worry about that. If it’s for that man, I’m happy to throw my life away.”

Holding such strong feelings and even trying to rescue Vincent, this man was one of the Royal Academy’s students. He was one of those who managed to get acquainted with and, ultimately, close to Vincent considered him worthy of putting on a pedestal.

He was also a member of the dissident group that sought to protect both Vincent and Ariel. Calling them rebels would be, actually, exaggerated. They were people unhappy with the current state of the kingdom that honestly thought it needs something or someone new if it was to have a better future.

In conclusion, they were only against the methods adopted by the ruling class. If the Royal Guard investigators tried to charge them with treason only for this, it would be way too outrageous. After all, apart from harboring dissenting ideas, they made no action yet.

But now that was about to change. Just for the sake of Vincent, they were attempting something that conceivably would get them accused of betrayal.

That was just how much charisma did Vincent have. Which was not surprising. He was the only person in this whole world Rion looked up to until now or would look up to in the future.



Spectators were separated from the execution ground by a high fence. It was so tall that its top couldn't be reached even while standing on a grown man's shoulders. It had gaps so that observing the area inside was possible, but they were so small that not even a child could squeeze through.

What's more, the fence was guarded by an escort of knights posted at regular intervals. The prisoner to be executed today was formerly of marquess rank, that meant influential people including the King himself, would be present to witness the event. No mishaps could be allowed to occur.

The security in the area of the execution site was nearly flawless, with one exception. An opening spotted by Vincent's would-be rescuers.

The chance would come at the very beginning of the ceremony when Vincent would appear at the site. Knowing that even those plotters assigned to observation duty felt nervous.

And finally, that time has come. Vincent was taken out of the building located behind the scaffold, his hands and legs chained together. And not just that. There was a steel collar on his neck and it too had a chain, this one leading to the shackles on his legs. All those bindings were short forcing him to walk with head bowed down and an awkward, restricted stride.

He might be a criminal but that kind of treatment was unthinkable for someone of his social status.

That pitiful sight caused anger to flare up in the students, making their blood rise and their faces burn from indignation.

"How dare they treat him in such a way."

"Calm down. We need to stay composed."

"I know that. I know, but..."

"Leave it. This is the moment, we need to go, now."

The group, until now hidden in the shadow of a building, set out. There was ten of

them. Unfortunately, that was too low of a number, even though they were earnest at their preparations. It was not hard to foresee an assault by ten inexperienced youths failing.

But before they reached their goal a lone figure unexpectedly blocked their path.

“It would be best if you stopped this nonsense.”

“What?”

“All that awaits you there is an ambush.”

“What did you say!?”

“Silly fools, your naive scheme was discovered long ago.”

“...Even if that’s the case.”

Even if it was a trap– a response started to display the student’s bravery that was interrupted half-way in.

“It’s all futile. You have been noticed already. May you have luck trying to escape.”

The lone man disappeared as soon as he said those words. And the students left behind...

“The trap was discovered! Catch them!”

“Everyone advance! Secure the rebels!”

Hearing such shouts in front of them left them no choice but retreat. The rescue attempt failed before it even began.



“What was that disturbance?”

The King was watching the execution from the third floor of a building right beside the gallows. This high and central location allowed him to hear the commotion and he asked the Royal Guard Commander present next to him. King’s presence required the

Royal Guard to secure the area properly.

“It’s likely to be rebels, sire.”

“Insurgency? Is he the reason?”

“So it would seem, sire.”

“Is all this really true then?”

“Sire, I’m afraid I do not understand the question.”

Vincent was charged with high treason for inciting the commoners to oppose the monarch. But in the Commander’s opinion that couldn’t be farther from the truth.

So his reply was a veiled advice to the king against making rash statements in public.

“...Should We be concerned?”

“No, sire. Their presence is not a surprise and we prepared a trap ahead of time. It seems to have worked.”

“That’s good. Proceed with the execution.”

“By your will, sire.”

The Commander signaled a knight waiting below to instruct the executioner to continue.

Being pulled by chains Vincent steadily walked the stairs of the gallows one after another. Suddenly a huge commotion erupted within the ranks of the spectators.

The King, and the people around him, initially thought this was just the crowd reacting to the beginning of the event, but then, as they moved their gazes towards the source of the disturbance, they could hardly believe their eyes.

They saw a figure of a man flying level with the balcony they were on, as high as a three-storey building. With a sword in his hand and arms stretched out like wings he easily went over the fence and landed next to the scaffolding.

“An attack! Knights, to arms!”

The Royal Guard Commander reacted immediately, befitting someone of his rank, but the escort knights posted along the fence were, at first, dumbfounded by the events.

But the Commander’s angry orders brought them back to their senses. They drew their swords and moved to attack the invader from behind.

“What!?”

What unfolded next stupefied the King and his attendants. One after another, all the attacking knights were blown away flying.

And the man with a sword never even turned his back to look at them. He just unhurriedly went towards the scaffold and stepped on the platform.

“What did just happen?”

“The rebels were just a diversion! Call off the pursuit, we need those men back immediately!”

In the Commander’s eyes, issuing orders took priority over responding to the monarch’s questions. But he too was surprised by what just happened.

The invader continued to advance, the knights continued to try to stop him only to be flung away before even having a chance to get close.

“Lord Commander! What is happening here!?”

There could be no mistake, the invader was using magic. That meant he wasn’t a commoner rebel. Moreover, his magic was clearly powerful, which made him even more of an enigma in the eyes of the King.

That was because of his hair, those were rare, the King could not recall any noble with black hair, save for that one girl watching from the lower floor.

A person unknown to the King excelling in magic, that was something very strange on its own.

“...Rion.”

Arnold was the one to answer his father's question.

"Who on earth is he?"

"...That is Vincent's former valet, Father."

"Valet? Which House does he hail from?"

Normally, a valet employed by a major House like the Windhills would be a member of the nobility. The King's question was based on this fact.

"He comes from the slums, Father."

"Impossible!"

The Crown Prince's answer surprised the King. This incredulity meant that, until now, His Majesty didn't even know Rion existed.

That meant his father was oblivious to the most problematic, in Arnold's opinion, aspect of the whole situation. And that he decided on Ariel's and Vincent's punishment without even knowing all the basic facts.

That gave rise to a host of very complex emotions in the Crown Prince's heart.

"Are the magic users here yet!?"

While the King was having a conversation with his son, the Commander was issuing one order after another in order to stop Rion. The invader was using magic, it was, therefore, obvious they needed their own spellcasters present to counter that. Unfortunately, his subordinate magic troops were stationed nowhere near close enough.

The Royal Guard expected an assault by commoners without magic. They set a trap for commoners with no magic. They got so fixated on the idea that no spellcasters were prepared just in case. The Commander was left to silently curse that carelessness.

However, regrets now would achieve nothing. They had to obstruct the person who came to take Vincent away.

The Commander started to consider personal intervention.

While that was happening Rion already reached Vincent's side. He cut all the shackles with magic so that his lord could move freely and handed over the sword in his hand.

"Here. Let us go, sir"

"Rion... Why do something so reckless?"

Vincent did not move despite Rion's invitation to leave. He only reproached his valet with melancholy on his face.

"To save Vincent-sama, of course."

"And it was futile to even attempt it."

"Why!?"

Rion never expected to hear such a thing from Vincent.

"His majesty, the King, decreed my death. I will never oppose his will."

"Sir, this is foolishness! The King is wrong! Why must you obey misguided orders!?"

Rion already considered Vincent to be worthy of being the heir to a Marquess, but as expected, he was unable to accept Vincent's point of view in this case.

"Because those orders come from the King!"

Vincent also began to raise his voice. Not because of anger but because his emotions started to overwhelm him.

"The King whose judgment is clearly flawed!"

"Even so, I still must heed his will! Running away would mean rebellion! I would never do such a thing!"

"Why!?"

"Because I am a person of the House Windhill! As someone at the top of the society, I

have the duty to set an example to others.”

“Like I would give a damn about such a thing! What does it matter when you are about to die?!”

Rion had already stopped using honorific words. He wanted Vincent to live, not because he was his Valet, but because he valued him as a person.

Those feelings were properly conveyed to Vincent. And that was why he could not afford to escape.

He knew that if he decided to run, Rion would waste his life on assisting his efforts to avoid the law. Vincent didn’t want that to happen.

“It has significance! I have always been a failure! I had lived all my life being told I’m not worthy of my social standing! That itself is why I have to be stubborn! Being born in the house of a Marquess, I want to die as a person of that House! You should understand these feelings more than anyone!”

“...I know that... I know that, but what becomes of me then? I served you not because of your rank! You yourself are the sole reason I served you!”

Rion valued Vincent’s life more than Vincent’s pride.

“Rion...”

Vincent was aware of that from the very beginning, but even so hearing it now made him unbearably happy.

“Please, live! No matter who you become afterward, as long as you live, I...”

Rion was not able to finish his thought. A surge of feelings put tears in his eyes and made him lower his head, even though he knew there were still many enemies nearby.

Vincent too was crying, but he carried his head high as he started to reply. Suddenly a shadow appeared in his blurry field of view.

“Thank you Rion. For me, you are someone special, more so than anyone else. The one and only true friend I ever had. That’s why... You have to live! And live my share of life too!”

“Wha!?”

Rion tumbled down being flung away from the scaffold by Vincent. Puzzled, he stood up to complain, but what he saw instead...

Was Vincent turning to him with a smile with a huge mortal wound on his body that was clearly inflicted by magic.

“R-Rion, my f-friend... W-will you h-hear my last w-wish?”

“S-sir...? Vincent?”

“P-Please... make my sister... , m-make A-Ariel... happ...”

Unable to carry the words to the end, Vincent listlessly fell to the ground. Rion rushed to the scaffold and embraced his remains.

“Vincent-sama?”

Despite the calls, Vincent didn’t answer.

“Vincent-sama!?”

He held him tightly but there was no heartbeat and no breathing. Vincent had already passed away.

“N-Nooo-aaaaaaaaaaaaahhh...!!!”

A heart-wrenching, sorrowful cry reverberated all through the execution grounds.

At that moment someone heartlessly launched a large spear composed of water towards Rion.

He caught that blow with his bare hand never letting go of Vincent’s body. The spear vanished immediately upon impact without doing any harm.

“N-No way!?”

“Maria, don’t pity him! Attack with all your might!”

Maria was astounded that her magic was stopped, but Lancelot urged her on. Erwin could also be spotted standing next to both of them. Due to magic troops being unable to make it here on time Lancelot's group was ordered to render assistance.

However, their intervention brought about an adverse effect.

"...Unforgivable..... Unforgivable..... I will never forgive you all!"

Hatred flared up in Rion. More intense and way beyond anything the existence known as Flay ever harbored towards the world around him. Flames the color of deep crimson and blood exploded from his body.

"Feel the wrath of the dragon! Tornado!"

Now a wind attribute magic assaulted Rion at a staggering speed. However, it dispersed under one slash of Rion's sword leaving little more than a loud sound behind.

"You aim to be the heir of the House Windhill with such meager strength? Your magic is pitiable compared to Lady Ariel's. Even Vincent-sama's magic was stronger than yours!"

"There's no way..."

And again Rion was assaulted by a grand spell. This time a phoenix-shaped flame assailed him from the sky. It was the highest grade of magic that was in the possession of Royal Family – the Flame Bird, Phoenix. But this was not cast by the King himself. This spell was of the Crown Prince Arnold's making.

The fire rained from the sky as if the phoenix was swallowing Rion with its beak. Such was the fury that not even ash would remain behind.

But when the conflagration dissipated, the onlookers saw Rion standing still as if nothing happened, surrounded by multiple dragons shaped of flame and as many silhouettes of water holding a spear.

The only thing that changed was his right eye, now clearly visible and burning brightly.

"...Heterochromia."

A word known to everyone was spoken unbidden. Until now, no one knew that people with heterochromatic eyes could use magic.

However, Rion had clearly used both the fire and the water attributes.

While everyone was left dumbfounded by the spectacle, the Royal Guard Commander made his move. Instantly descending to the ground level, with sword drawn, he began to attack Rion. His figure, like an unstoppable gale, closed the distance between them in a blink.

The Commander's sword flashed in an arc. Rion tried to defend with his own blade, but unable to kill the momentum of the blow he was knocked to the ground.

Following his first blow the Commander lunged at Rion's prone form, but...

"...Alive!"

An order from the King halted his sword.

Instead of running Rion through with his blade, the Commander kicked him hard in the gut. The boy rolled with a groan, then was forced to lay on his stomach with legs spread wide, his movements restricted. He could feel a tip of a sword on the nape of his neck.

"Don't move."

He was ordered, not that he was able to. Rion's anger was extinguished by the overwhelming difference in strength and he was back in full control of his emotions. He was clearly shown his lack of combat experience.

"This man shall not die! His deeds may be criminal, but they come out of boundless loyalty!! To repay that with death, would be equally wrong! Imprison him in the tower, We shall decide his punishment later."

"...By your will, sire!"

The Commander affirmed after a slight delay. The castle tower was only used to incarcerate royalty and people with high social standing. Rion was neither of those and, given that he was yet to be given a pardon, the Commander found the departure from the usual customs odd.

Nevertheless, this was His Majesty's order, he could only obey.

Thus, Rion was imprisoned within the castle.

Chapter 33

The Value of What Was Lost

Among all the audience rooms within the castle, this particular one could be used for unofficial meetings where the protocol was a hindrance. It was not strange for the King and the Queen to be here, it was unusual for the other party to be Royal Guard Commander, though.

Normal briefings the Commander took part in happened in his office, an audience room was usually not required. The official reason why they met in one this time, was that the King was about to grant audience to someone and the three of them had matters to discuss beforehand.

But that was actually an excuse, the meeting place was chosen with discretion in mind, neither of them wished for outsiders to hear the particulars of their discussion. Regardless of how trusted they were considered to be otherwise.

“To summarize, both Vincent Woodville and Ariel Woodville are completely innocent.”

“That much is obvious. Those high treason charges strained credulity from the start. Tell me what did they actually do before things got to that point.”

“That was not a figure of speech, they are completely innocent.”

“...They what?”

The King thought that, even though the high treason was an exaggeration, they must have committed some sort of crime. But now the Commander said that they were completely innocent, which meant they had done nothing.

“I’ll start by explaining how we ended up with high treason.”

“Please, do so.”

“It started with persistent minor harassment, so-called chastisements, of the Royal Academy student named Maria Theodore. A girl rumored to be the missing princess

as you both surely know.”

Both the Commander and the King looked at the Queen inquisitively. But she only shook her head lightly. Maria Theodore was not her daughter, she was sure of that much without the need of detailed investigation.

“...The complaint letter that triggered the case treated those rumors as facts and, with this, framed the treatment she suffered as a disrespect towards the royal family.”

“That’s a very crude stitch-up.”

“Weren’t you aware from the start that the whole thing is a made-up pile of nonsense?”

“I... Yes, I was.”

The Commander was unexpectedly strict with the King. His sense of duty to nurture him into a good ruler was as strong now as it had been when they were children.

“Anyway, even if Miss Theodore was of royal blood, the Woodville siblings were completely unrelated to her ordeal. The only connection was from some of the actual perpetrators selfishly borrowing Ariel Woodville’s name and authority in the beginning.”

“...Alright. That makes me understand why they got charged even less. So?”

“There was a person who made Ariel Woodville into a scapegoat.”

“Do we know who?”

“We have yet to find out for certain. This information comes from that thing, but the identity of the mastermind was not divulged.”

“...In that case, we should probably assume it’s completely unreliable.”

The testimony came from Rion. It would not be strange to see him protect Ariel, rather it was safe to assume he would definitely do so.

The King shared that opinion, however, it was immediately discounted by the Commander.

“There is evidence that was gathered when that thing noticed that Ariel Woodville Windhill... That’s a mouthful to say all the time, I’ll shorten it to Ariel from now on. So, when it noticed someone was attempting to implicate Ariel in a crime, it started gathering counter evidence to use at future date.”

“Have you verified that evidence?”

“No, I was politely informed not to waste my time on things that would now change nothing. There also seemed to be some sort of personal debt in play and the thing was unwilling to reveal the culprit as a result.”

“Change nothing...”

The first sentence was clearly scathing sarcasm. It was obvious that the thing had no intentions of clarifying what really happened.

“This didn’t stop me from speculating, though.”

“And?”

“The mastermind is either Maria Theodore or Charlotte Lanchester. Both were deeply involved.”

“So the perpetrator acted out the main role in her own little play?”

“One can certainly feel that from this whole story. After all, she never fought back while under harassment, no matter how harsh it got. However, I believe the real culprit is Charlotte Lanchester.”

“Your reasoning?”

“That thing clearly loathes Miss Theodore, it was obvious during the execution. It would never protect her like this.”

“I see. What would be Lady Charlotte’s aim assuming you’re right? “

“Dissolution of your son’s engagement most likely. As for her motives...”

The Commander did not finish his thought out of consideration.

“...Ah, youth. There are no other ladies of marriageable age in any of the three houses after all.”

If the engagement with Ariel was called off, the only other fitting unmarried lady would be Charlotte. However, presently the King decided to overlook her candidacy as punishment.

“That is all we know about the circumstances of the high treason accusation. Now we need to broach the supposed disrespect towards the Crown Prince. A rather delicate subject”

“What makes it so sensitive?”

“All that is required for this accusation to be true is that your son considers it so.”

“Now that is just...”

All the King had to shield himself from the Commander’s severe sarcasm was a bitter smile. It was not hard to decipher the implied meaning of those words, this strife was entirely induced by Arnold.

“But just in case I investigated the rumors about insurrection brewing in the Academy. What I found was not rebels, but a bunch of hard-working students from poor backgrounds passionate about the future of the Kingdom.”

“Are you certain?”

“That is how I see it.”

“...I’ll have those captured during the attempted raid on the execution grounds released.”

However you looked at his words, the Commander clearly wanted this to happen. So the King met his expectations.

“By your will.”

Hearing the words he wanted to hear, the Commander was satisfied.

“How about the other students? I have heard some of them boldly rebuked Arnold in

public.”

“The antipathy towards your son has been growing for quite some time now, that much is true. However, its root cause was his obvious and public mistreatment of Ariel.”

“...Alright. What kind of aftereffects will this event bring?”

“The worst kind. Vincent and Ariel Woodville enjoyed an overwhelming support from the students of lower social status. And we had both of them charged. Furthermore the whole student body is aware that the accusations were a sham.”

“I see...”

The results were worse than the King expected. Because of this incident, the royal family lost the trust of many excelling commoner students. It was now an open question whether any of them would devote their strength to the realm in the future.

“To be blunt, this incident was a catastrophe.”

And on top of that, the Commander delivered the finishing blow to the King.

“I know.”

“No, you actually don’t. If you truly grasped the scale of the disaster, you would be crushed right now. Do you really not see what the crown lost this time?”

The Commander was nowhere close the end of his lecture, he was just warming up.

“What else could there be?”

“What else? Firstly, you lost the prospect of having the most popular and loved Queen in the history of the kingdom. I’m sure you know better than most what effects would that have.”

“...You’re right.”

The support of the people. This was the strength of the royal family. No matter how much power the nobles had, that power was based on the population of their own fiefs. As long as those commoners were supportive of the royal family, the aristocrats

would never be able to use their strength against the crown. Not just militarily but even on the political arena.

The royal family lost the opportunity to gain that popular support. By extension, it lost a chance to increase the authority of the King.

“Secondly, you just executed a future lord marquess that was loyal to the crown even when facing death. If my memory doesn’t fail me, the last time there was someone like that was during the founding days of the nation, correct?”

“That... Is probably true.”

Although the three marquess-rank Houses could be rightly called the pillars of the kingdom, it would be as valid to call them a thorn in its side. They, like all nobles of influence, acted with interest of their House above all else. And naturally, whenever a noble family gained power the authority of the royals waned.

The concept of noble Houses offering all their loyalty and support to the King had a reflection in reality only in the very early years of the country. Afterward, it turned into little more than a window-dressing.

“And like this the crown, willingly, threw away something it will not be able to obtain on its own even with decades of effort. Reflect on this, please.”

“...Alright.”

The responsibility for allowing this to happen lied not only with Arnold, but also with the King who indulgently allowed the events to develop in the manner desired by two marquess Houses, without trying to understand the situation. In the Commander’s eyes, this was tantamount to dereliction of authority in the face of crisis.

“Now you have the full picture, more or less. What do you wish to do? “

“Before that, a final question.”

“Yes?”

“That thing’s power, how did you feel fighting it?”

“That was not a fight. I fully exploited the fact that it was preoccupied with the Crown

Prince and his group. Showing an opening like that is a clear sign of inexperience.”

“I see.”

“However...”

“Hmm?”

“Something made me think that I had to make use of that opening right then. That thing had yet to take an offensive action. I struggle to imagine what would happen had it been allowed to do so.”

“...I think I understand.”

A person having an affinity with more than one attribute was something mentioned only in legends. However, Rion had demonstrated such a prowess. Even if all he displayed was just multiple small, dragon-shaped flames and human-shaped water of unknown capabilities.

“Well then, shall we hold an audience?”

“Yes. Bring that Rion here.”

“At once.”



Some time later, Rion was dragged into the audience room, with “dragged” being a very apt word. Like in Vincent’s case, there were manacles on both his hands and feet. In such an uncomfortable state, he was carried into the room by two guards on his flanks.

The Queen looked heartbroken by this sight.

“Good work. Now withdraw.”

“Sir?”

“My presence is enough. There will be no problems.”

Seeing the knights hesitate, the Commander pressured them to withdraw. He wanted the upcoming audience kept as confidential as possible.

“Raise your head, boy.”

But Rion, slumped on his knees and looking downcast, did not respond to the Commander’s request. His face stubbornly kept facing the floor.

“Raise. Your. Head. Do not make this any more unpleasant than it has to be.”

Finally, responding to the implied threat, Rion raised his head. He had no eye-patch on. The red and blue eyes were on full display and were clearly seen by the royal couple.

The King groaned inadvertently. Not because of the heterochromia. It was due to seeing Rion’s face up close for the first time.

The Queen, observing from her husband’s side was not even surprised by Rion’s eyes. Just from one glance, one could easily see that the resemblance between her and Rion was uncanny. His well-proportioned, androgynous face was something he clearly inherited from his mother who was said to be the most beautiful in the kingdom.

The Queen couldn’t hold her emotions any longer and had tears flowing down her cheeks. At this point, the royal couple was certain that Rion was their child. Nevertheless, neither the King nor the Queen would name him such.

In this world, it was widely acknowledged that heterochromia brings misfortune. Not even the King could laugh it away as a foolish superstition. There were many tales from the past reinforcing this view and now everyone believed it to be a fact. Also, the population of this world viewed science with suspicion and hostility.

And finally, the lord Rion was serving ended up executed. This alone would lead many to believe that it was a misfortune brought by his heterochromia.

The crown cannot recognize as royal someone that would be expected to bring great misfortune to the nation. If that was possible, Rion wouldn’t have been cast out of the castle in the first place.

He was not abducted. He was abandoned by his mother, the Queen, after she had learned she had given birth to a child with the sinister heterochromia. This was solely

her secret at first. The King became aware of this much later after nearly a decade passed.

“Rion. Is this a real name?”

The King and the Queen were already confident that Rion was their child. But the Commander, despite being aware of that, was in mind to find some more clear-cut evidence. He considered that his duty as the third party present.

“...I don’t understand what are you asking about.”

“Wasn’t this name something given to you later in life?”

“...Yes, by Lady Ariel.”

“In other words, you had another name before that. That name was?”

“Irrelevant. Those names and the people they belonged to passed away already. I am Rion.”

Flay had already died in the slums. Ryou had already died in a traffic accident on his former world. Even if their consciousness was still with him, somehow, the fact that they died was the truth. Rion was a mix of their personalities in one body, even if his personality had arisen from theirs, he was neither of them.

Rion was honestly telling an implausible truth, unsurprisingly he was not understood.

“...Regardless, I will have the names of the dead.”

The Commander simply took Rion’s answer at face value and matched his next question accordingly. There was no specific reason for this. He just thought that asking in that way would make Rion reveal more.

“Why?”

“Because I need to know.”

“...Flay.”

And so Rion spoke the name of Flay. It was because he knew that the name “Ryou”

would not be conveyed properly. As a result, he said what the King and Queen wanted to hear.

“Is it now...”

With this, the Commander was also certain. The name of the abandoned prince was something only the Queen and the midwife that was entrusted with taking the baby out of the castle knew. She and the King decided to name the child Frey had it been a boy and Fia if it was a girl. But to mislead the search effort, the King was told a princess was born.

Thus, whenever someone appeared claiming to be the missing princess, the Queen immediately knew that that person was a fake. She was not actually wounded by the fakes claiming to be her child but rather she was tormented by the guilt of abandoning her son.

“Fine. The King, in his mercy, decided to commute your punishment to a short-term imprisonment. You shall be released today.”

Even after being told by this, Rion’s face showed no signs of happiness. He just kept listening. silent and expressionless.

“Now, We shall hold a discussion about your future.”

The King took the reins of the conversation from the Commander. This would probably be the first and the last time in his life he would speak with a criminal.

“Lord Marquess Windhill asks for you to be returned to his House. What do you think of this?”

“...All my ties to that place have been long severed. I have no reason or duty to accede to his wish.”

Hearing this the King now knew that Windhill’s request was just for the sake of form.

“Have you thought about joining the Royal Guard? You certainly have the power required.”

“...It would be best for you not to do that.”

“Why is that?”

“Because your precious Crown Prince would die as a result.”

“Not a word more, you insolent fool!”

The Commander shouted in anger before the King even got to say anything. Rion clearly stated his intent of killing the Crown Prince given the chance. That was something the Commander could not forgive.

“Then run me through with your sword! Don’t just let your prince be disrespected unless your loyalty is all talk!”

...But Rion shouted back with a vigor not losing to the Commander’s. The older man was surprised and overpowered by the force of the spirit carried by that voice. Perhaps that was because he already knew Rion was of royal blood. But whatever the reason, he was rendered speechless.

So was The King. The monarch also became anxious about releasing Rion, he was no longer sure it was a good idea.

Seeing her husband’s unease the Queen decided to act.

“Do not say things like that.”

“...I wish to find atonement.”

“And how will you do that in death? I was there on the execution day, I heard your precious lord, he did not want this.”

The Queen was present at Vincent’s execution. She didn’t want to attend and watch the proceedings at first, but for some reason, she started to feel she had to be there after a while. And as if being led by fate, Rion had appeared. It was her who asked the King to spare Rion’s life.

“...I swore to protect him even if it was to cost my life.”

“To whom?”

“My...”

“Is that person not important to you?”

“...She is.”

Due to the Queen’s words, the expression on Rion’s face turned into anguish. He was at a loss as to what he should do and conflicting desires tormented his mind.

“Do you not need to protect that person? Wasn’t that the last wish your lord entrusted to you?”

“...I do not know how to face her. I let someone important to her die.”

“You don’t want to face her?”

“...No.”

“Well, you should go anyway. If you want to meet her with a smile, then smile, if you want to cry, then it’s fine to do so. Be honest with your feelings, wouldn’t that be the best way to show sincerity to that person?”

“...Yes.”

For some reason, his heart answered honestly to the Queen’s words. Whether it was brought about by their connection as mother and child, Rion had no way of knowing.

“We want you to give your utmost searching for Ariel Woodville starting now. You are to inform us immediately upon locating her.”

The King ordered with no more hesitation on his face. Seeing the heartfelt conversation between Rion and his wife, he couldn’t make himself consider killing him any longer.

“...I know where she is.”

“What? How...?”

The King was confused. How could Rion know the location of a girl that couldn’t be found by a combined effort of the army sent to search for her.

“Once I obtained the information she would be sold into slavery, there were many

ways available to handle the situation.”

“Even so...”

Being able to pull the strings required a certain amount of power. Rion was able to obtain that power despite his young age and meager position of a valet. That was surprising. And made the King afraid of him again.

“Lord husband, wasn’t there another way to move forward you had in mind?”

Again, the Queen with a great timing acted in order to stop her husband’s train of thought from going in that direction. Something she was able to do because of how long have they been married together.

“...Yes, dear. The truth is, We have an idea for your future, boy.”

“You have?”

“There is a territory belonging to the crown on the eastern border of the kingdom. Can We leave that in your care?”

“...Eh?”

“You will not be a castellan. We shall grant you the rank of a baron with the territory as your fief. You lack meritorious deeds for anything more. It would be best if you did not expect much, though. That location is strategically important and requires high military expenditure. Thus, there is no investment, the land doesn’t flourish and living standards are low leading to low tax yields. Poor, yet expensive to maintain, that kind of fief.”

Hearing the King explain this much forced Rion to pause for a while to comprehend and organize the monarch’s words. That was not the sort of proposal usually directed at freshly released criminals.

“...Is this serious?”

“Obviously.”

“Even though I have no achievements to justify it?”

“...That’s... We have Our reasons.”

A truly royal behavior. Rion decided that was the King’s way of compensating for the false charges levied on Vincent and Ariel. However, in reality, with the King not being able to recognize Rion as his child, he wanted to at least give him a fief to support his future. It was his way of showing parental love.

The King never lied about his reasons. Rion just misunderstood it on his own.

“I think you should accept it.”

The Queen also wanted Rion to take the land regardless of whether it may be right or wrong to do so. She thought that this was the only way to keep her connection to Rion from being severed.

“Why is that?”

“Can your precious person cope with the life of a commoner?”

“Ah...”

Her words accurately touched the sore point of Rion’s worries. There was no way that Ariel, who lived all her life as an aristocrat, would be able to bear the life of a commoner. After all, she even needed the help of maids to change clothes.

As a result, Rion had accepted the King’s offer. He would do anything to be released and he thought to himself that if he got sick of the barony, he could always run away.

Having chosen to live, he wanted to meet Ariel as soon as possible.

The Queen left right after Rion as she secretly wanted to see her child off.

“It appears I can’t stop telling you off, sire.”

“What do you mean?”

“I feel like this is a very bad outcome.”

“...Bad outcome, eh?”

The King knew what the Commander was trying to say. He also felt the same.

“Yes. Somehow, I feel it would have been better to kill him no matter how much it would wound the Queen.”

“I know how you feel. But this is not an order I can issue, even if I am the King. He is still my own child. And my own feelings aside, just seeing my wife making that kind of face...”

“...I feel the same.”

There was one more thing that was lost. The two men no longer saw a chance for Arnold to grow into a wise ruler they expected him to become until now.

Once they arrived at that conclusion, it was natural to consider erasing Rion’s existence but they felt unable to proceed with that train of thought.

The World now needed Rion even if just a little bit.

Chapter 34

The Event's Unchanged Outcome

Ariel had already lost count of how many days had passed since she was confined to this place. And on top of that, she had no recollection of the first few days either.

Having been accused of something she had nothing to do with, she admitted to all the charges to cover for the commoners close to her, knowing that they were the main target of the investigation bureau. Her brother Vincent, having the same thoughts, was taken by the investigators at the same time.

That was the last time she had seen Vincent.

After being taken away, she was, in practice, left alone. That meant she might not have undergone a strict interrogation but on the flip side, she did not have the chance to protest either.

While she was thinking how to proceed from there, she was, out of the blue, handed her sentence.

The punishment far exceeded a simple loss of status. She was also deprived of her civil rights. In short, she was turned into a slave. When she heard that her future disintegrated in front of her eyes. As that revelation started to crush her, she was told what would Vincent's fate was to be and that was like twisting the knife in the wound.

Public execution for the crime of high treason. From then on, Ariel remembered nothing.

She vaguely recalled being on the receiving end of very unpleasant stares. She had short flashbacks of being transported somewhere in a carriage. But save for this, she had no memories from that period.

When her awareness came back, she was already in this place. A room with one bed and small garderobe. The room was so simple that it paled in comparison to the living quarters of the staff in the mansion.

The food was rather crude too, but it was at least provided every mealtime without a hitch.

She was provided a change of clothing. Those were made out of good quality materials, however, their design was rather obscene and she surprisingly found herself unwilling to wear them even though she did not find them all that troubling.

But even so, she could not be wearing the same set of clothes forever which made her face another problem. Ever since she was born she had never put on clothes on her own.

Unable to hide that fact she was forced to make use of people tasked with looking after her. However, they were not like her maids who did everything for her, they limited their effort to teaching her how to do things on her own.

There was nothing she could do about that. She was already a slave. Finally coming to terms with this fact she set herself on working hard on her new life.

And then, one day, Ariel realized what kind of place this was.

Sometimes, she could hear voices coming from the other side of the wall. It sounded like groans, so at first, she thought there were sick people there. But then she was told the noise was made by men and women sleeping together which made her face turn pale.

Even though she had a sheltered upbringing she now knew her fate. She had become a slave, in other words, she was sold here in order to accompany men.

After figuring that out Ariel lived her days in fear expecting a man to open the door and enter her room at any moment. Every time she heard the voices from the other side of the wall, she covered her ears with her hands in order to block the noise.

But even so, that day was bound to come. The women taking care of her switched their focus to teaching her how to take care of men's needs.

Ariel failed those lessons on purpose, she expected she would be sent to employ the skills once she mastered them. However, even that lack of success was praised and she was told she might be able to make her partner pleased nonetheless.

That being the case, she thought her only remaining choice was to escape. But

uncertainty about how would she live afterward stopped her from trying to run. Ariel didn't even have spare food for tomorrow's meal. And she had no confidence in being able to work like a commoner would have to.

Faced with the inability to do anything she fell back into despair. She shed many tears during that time.

And then the day she was dreading arrived.

She heard someone being guided down the hallway. Those footsteps were slowly getting closer to her room. And there was nowhere to hide in her room even if she tried.

She decided she would rather die than be violated, but there were no tools nearby that could aid with suicide. While she was thinking about what to do, the footsteps stopped in front of her door.

There could be no more doubt, her room was the destination.

The door slowly opened from outside and Ariel noticed a man on the other side, his appearance caused her to slap his cheek by reflex.

"Eh?"

Being suddenly slapped Rion's eyes opened wide.

"Rion! So you even visit places like this!?"

Still surprised Rion was greeted by her angry question. Ariel's thoughts have been in such utter chaos that this somehow became her biggest concern.

"...Do I visit... Well, I do own this establishment, milady."

"...Eh?"

"Ah, yes. I must apologize for making you wait here so long. Various issues prevented me from coming immediately."

"...You own this establishment?"

Although she calmed down somewhat, unsurprisingly her confusion was yet to clear completely. Being suddenly told that Rion was the owner of a brothel, it was natural for Ariel to struggle with grasping the circumstances.

“There’s no need for milady to have any strange suspicions, I do not give places like this one my custom. As for how I ended owning one, that’s a complicated tale best left for later.”

“Then, I’m...”

“The plan was to just shelter milady here. That sadly required confining milady to this room, for which I must apologize. Obviously, it would be a big trouble if this hideout was discovered by strangers.”

Rion knew that the Crown Prince Arnold had come to the slave market. From the start, he had focused his information gathering on the aristocrats who frequented the auctions. But even without that, he would still be notified about this by the slavers there, who were his subordinates.

“I see... In other words, I have become Rion’s slave haven’t I?”

“Eh?”

“...What is my master’s first wish?”

Ariel whispered this softly into Rion’s ear after bringing her body close. It was one of the things she was taught by her female caretakers. Rion, never expecting this, was completely dumbfounded.

“W-Who was it!? Who taught lady Ariel those kinds of things!?”

He figured out the circumstances immediately. His angry voice traveled into the building while he was trying to hide his embarrassment. Seeing that reaction, Ariel laughed happily. It has been a long time since she had laughed from the bottom of her heart like this.

“That was just a joke. And now I’m even with you for the surprise you gave me earlier.”

“...Milady, this was a bad joke.”

“However, I undeniably am your slave.”

“Ah well, there was no choice...”

“...Oh? So you had no choice but to save me?”

“No, of course not! I was trying to say there were no other methods to save you!”

“Kid—ding.”

Ariel’s heart became lively. She now had Rion, who she always trusted would save her, in front of her after all those days of fearing for the future.

“Before we continue, there’s something I have to tell milady.”

Rion poured cold water on Ariel’s cheerful feelings.

“...What is it?”

Because Rion was looking at her with a serious face, Ariel’s expression changed too. Her heart could already anticipate what he was about to say.

“I was unable to save lord Vincent.”

“...That was never possible.”

There were no easy ways to overturn that kind of sentence. And all of them were beyond Rion’s means.

That was what Ariel meant by her answer.

“I was able to reach him, but in the end, he lost his life while saving mine.”

“You did what?!”

Rion managed to surprise her again.

“Milady?”

“You reached his side? He saved you?”

“I went to rescue Vincent-sama but, because he was unwilling to go without persuasion, my attempt was delayed and... Honestly, it’s all excuses.”

Saying this brought out old wounds from within Rion’s heart. But Ariel was glaring at him looking as if she was about to slap him again.

“...I am sorry, milady.”

Thinking about how she must be feeling right now, Rion bowed his head deeply to apologize.

“What are you sorry for?”

He heard Ariel’s voice from above his head.

“For failing to save lord Vincent.”

“Stupid! I am angry that you attempted something that foolishly reckless!”

“...Eh? Eeh?”

Rion, raising his head because of this, was suddenly embraced by Ariel’s arms as she hugged him with all her might.

“I had already given up on saving brother. Doing that was really painful, but I knew that at least he would face his death with pride.”

“...That, he did.”

He intended to listen carefully but having Ariel so close, whispering into his ear, dulled the grief from recalling Vincent’s death.

“I have lost my beloved older brother. If I were to lose Rion as well, I could not carry on living.”

As she spoke, his sad feelings slowly faded away. Rion’s longing for Ariel had surpassed the sadness he felt about Vincent’s death.

Slowly, with some hesitation at first, both arms of Rion embraced Ariel’s back and he began to hug her tightly too.

“...And now I am no longer an aristocrat, I am a slave.”

“...That’s for appearances only.”

“Oh? Are you planning to raise my status, then?”

“Naturally.”

“Through marriage with you, perhaps?”

Now that the impediment that was the disparity between their social status was lost, Ariel became excessively assertive.

“...Is milady really fine with someone like me?”

“Those honorifics are unnecessary, you know.”

“...Ah, are you really fine with me?”

“The real question is whether Rion is fine with me.”

Because Rion’s most important person was being this lovely his heart filled with nothing but longing. He could find no more reasons to repress those feelings any longer.

“...My heart has been thinking about you all this time.”

“I know.”

“Not fair...”

This kind of youthful flirting, something finally no longer forbidden to them, carried on for a while. After they had their fill, Rion shared the King’s plan with Ariel.

He was mostly concerned that she might take being at the bottom of noble hierarchy harder than if she became an actual commoner.

But all she said in response was that everything would be fine for her as long as she was beside him.

After hearing her response, Rion decided to proceed to the border territory. Thus Baron Rion Frey and Ariel, his wife to be, arrived at the world's stage.

In the game, this event concluded with Ariel being disinherited by Lord Marquess Windhill and married off to a distant noble.

The will of this World was arranging events to arrive at its desired form. This process had no relation to concepts of good and evil, neither was it concerned whether things were being arranged for the sake of the protagonist or the villain.



Even though Rion decided to go to the border territory, it wasn't like he could just set off immediately. Creating a new barony required the crown to perform many bureaucratic procedures before the rank and land could be awarded to him.

Rion too had many things to arrange before leaving the capital.

"So, with things like this Ain will replace m—"

"I refuse."

Ain declined flatly without even letting Rion finish his words.

"Eh?"

"This role is beyond me."

"...In that case, Gordon..."

"I refuse as well."

Gordon did the same thing.

"Eh?"

"I am not fit for this role either."

"I disagree, Gordon, you did lead your own group before, right?"

Before Rion became the leader of the underworld, Gordon was one of the gang bosses competing for the top.

“The scale and objectives were way different. The way boss’ organization is now, someone like me won’t be able to control it at all.”

“Then who do you think should replace me?”

“No one can. It can’t be done.”

“The sentiment is nice, I guess, but I will end up far away from here. How will that even work?”

“Even if you are not present, it’s fine for boss to remain the head.”

“I will not able to manage affairs from such a distant location.”

“It will be alright with me and Ain acting as deputies.”

“...You guys.”

Gordon clearly contradicted himself just now. There was no way Rion wouldn’t be able to notice that.

“Yes, boss?”

“Isn’t that ridiculous? Then isn’t it fine if I’m not a leader anyway?”

If Ain and Gordon could just represent him as deputies, there was no apparent need for Rion to remain as the head.

“Whether it is an actual leader or just a figurehead, the organization need someone to stand at its top. However, I don’t feel like serving under Ain and neither does he like the prospect of being my underling. So if we are to cooperate together, there can’t be a difference in status.”

This sort of logical explanation was totally unlike Gordon. Having a plan like this ready, it was obvious that they prepared for this conversation beforehand.

“I can do this in name only.”

“Everyone here needs that name.”

Rion was the beacon of hope, the only ray of light in the darkness for those living in the slums. If that was lost, the area would revert to its original state – a place of carnage where no one dreamed about the future. Both Ain and Gordon knew that.

“...Fine. But I’ll need a way to exchange information with you two.”

“I have a way for that.”

Now Ain started talking. This too seemed to be prepared ahead of time. But then, working underneath Rion forced them to develop a capability to anticipate his future moves. Without that, they would not be able to cope with his orders arriving one after another.

“And that is?”

“We will have merchant caravans travel back and forth between the territories.”

“That can work. However my new fief is poor and remote, can we manage to trade without a loss?”

“I’m sure boss will think of a way.”

“Mhm. I need to find a way to make my fief prosper, too. Alright, I’ll figure something out. But the travel time would still be in range of months, right?”

“There is another facet to this plan.”

Ain and other spared no effort to figure out a way to keep Rion involved in the organization.

“Explain?”

“We still lack details, but we want to expand to other towns”

“...I figured it would come to this eventually. Isn’t there still much space for expansion in the capital, though?”

“There is. But that would make us start attracting attention. We do have the power to

take over the commercial district, but attempting that will make everyone aware of that fact. And while I don't mind alerting our usual competition it would be bad to have the authorities focus on us."

"True..."

Even though they were involved in many different kinds of enterprises all of that was in the underground after all. If the crown discovered an influential and powerful black market organization like theirs, it would without a doubt try to clamp down on it. And that would be the end for the slums. No matter how hard they tried, they would not be able to oppose the kingdom.

Rion had a habit when he was thinking about complex things like those, he would close his eyes and raise his right index finger to the bridge of his nose. Once that finger descended to his lips, it would mean that his thoughts were collected.

"What's the plan, boss?"

Ain knew that habit well and asked for Rion's thoughts.

"You can go ahead. But target the settlements between my territory and the capital."

"Yes."

"We need to plan our moves before acting. I also feel it would be better to start from smaller towns before moving on to the bigger ones, but I'll make the final decision on this as I travel to my fief. I can't be sure before I see the places in question."

Gordon and Ain already knew that whenever Rion really got involved, plans tended to grow larger in scope. Here they suddenly found themselves discussing a takeover of all the towns along the way from the capital to the remote region. That was tantamount to aiming to be the top of the country's underground society.

"That's boss for you, things are gonna get busy again."

Although Ain said it with exaggerated exhaustion in his voice, he was obviously happy. By following Rion, their horizons were bound to get broader and larger. No matter how many difficulties that may pose, being able to face the future like that made him unbearably happy.

“We’ll need more henchmen too, eh? Shall we start recruiting excelling scumbags? We will need at least one for each town and we just don’t have enough men.”

Gordon felt the same. For him, deciding to bend his neck to Rion had always been the best choice he had ever made in his life.

“Incorporate some of those smart enough to jump ship too. Crushing all potential opposition would weaken the underground too much for the future.”

And Rion too enjoyed figuring out those kinds of schemes. Even if they were heartless ones bound to drop other people into the deepest pit of despair. After all, Rion, loathing humanity as a whole, was not the kind of person to bother with such trivial considerations.

On the other hand, Ariel, who had seen that side of Rion for the first time, was simply having fun.

“Hey, Rion. Does this mean that I’m not only going to be a wife of a baron but also a wife of a crime lord as well?”

“W-Well...”

“What does that make me?”

“The usual way of addressing someone in this position is ‘senior sister’.”

It was Ain who answered her question as Rion was still not well versed in these sorts of underworld customs.

“Oh my, a “senior sister”, even though I’m younger than most of you?”

“Our little society does not concern itself with age, obligations and social ties are everything.”

“Social obligations...”

As one would expect, it was hard for Ariel, a sheltered daughter of an aristocrat, to understand it. But even so, Ain didn’t give up.

“Hmm. As an example, we call Frey the boss, but our social ties to him are like his

children and we follow him like we would a father.”

“So that’s how it is?”

“Yes. Incidentally, Gordon and I are “sworn brothers”. Although Gordon is far older than me, since I became boss’ child first I am the senior brother.”

“...As I thought, I don’t get it. Then why am I the senior sister?”

“Because you are the wife of the boss, you stand at the top of the family.”

“...But shouldn’t I be the mother then rather than a sibling of yours?”

“...I guess? I wonder why things are like that now?”

“You don’t even know that? Fine, I’ll explain then. The underworld is, obviously, a place for men. A woman, even if she’s the wife of a boss can hold no power here. Therefore she can never be the mother to be obeyed but is a senior sister to be respected instead.”

There was hardly anyone who could match Gordon’s knowledge of customs brought about by years of experience and accumulated wisdom.

“That’s like saying a woman and her blood is worth less here.”

“We are not removed from normal society, we can only mirror what is true there.”

“Oh my, well said.”

“T-Thank you very much.”

Just like this, Ariel had also won the hearts of Rion’s subordinates.

Ariel’s true qualities were not straightforward to notice. Her real self was obscured by the radiance of her appearance, bearing, and pedigree.

Chapter 35

The Conclusion Of The Royal Academy Arc

Finally, it was the time for Rion and Ariel to depart from the capital. But even with that being said, it was not as though it was some sort of special event for the wider world. Usually, there would be hardly anyone interested in a baron traveling to his territory with his wife.

It was early in the morning, just after sunrise. Rion was riding a horse down one of the nearly deserted streets of the city with Ariel sitting in front of him in his embrace.

She would leave the capital today, the place where she was born and raised. They picked this route and traveled at a leisurely pace so she could soak in the memories before leaving. After a while, the eastern gate in the outer walls entered their line of sight.

Roughly at that time groups of people began to appear on both sides of the road. The most noticeable of them were women clad in colorful and very revealing clothes – the courtesans working in Rion’s brothels.

But they were not alone. Rion’s subordinates and denizens of the slums appeared as well. The presence of so many people instantly made the spectacle lively.

“Really guys? Weren’t you the ones to say that this should be kept low-key?”

Despite him saying these things, the people in the crowd knew that he was just trying to hide his embarrassment. So they ignored his words completely and showered the young couple with flower petals and congratulations.

It was their way of showing consideration and not letting this day be dominated by feelings of departure.

Their intentions reached Ariel and she gave everyone her most radiant smile through tears of gratitude.

And Rion too was touched by their consideration. When he met them for the first time

all those years ago, he had been looking for revenge. Even though that initial encounter was of the worst possible kind, they were now giving him and his beloved as much goodwill as they could give.

With this, the number of important people in Rion's heart increased once again. Furthermore, it increased by orders of magnitude. Now, instead of having just Ariel and Vincent as the only people he cared about, he found all the people here precious too. There was probably nobody in the whole kingdom who cared about so many people as he did now.

This was not the end of the surprises, though. Rion's subordinates prepared something even greater for them. A man and a woman emerged from the crowd separately and walked towards the horse. As soon as that happened, the crowds started to gather all around Rion and that couple. He was initially confused but soon realized that all that was happening here was to prepare for this meeting.

Ariel reacted first. She slipped out of Rion's arms immediately, dismounted the horse and hurriedly came before the two. Rion now realized who they were as well. He descended from the saddle in a hurry following his wife.

"...Mother, father... May I call you that still?"

"Do not ask such petty questions. You are our daughter, no matter what."

"Father..."

Ariel's parents were wearing clothes so shabby that no one would think they belonged to the circle of highest nobles in the land. All this was because she was expelled from the House and she was thus not allowed to meet them under normal circumstances.

So they dressed in poor-looking clothes and mixed with the crowd of courtesans to be able to have this conversation in secret. Furthermore, Rion now ordered his subordinates to establish a perimeter in the nearby buildings.

After issuing those orders Rion too approached the marquess couple standing in front of them.

"Ah, sir..."

However, despite clearly being in their field of vision, Rion was studiously ignored by

Lord Marquess.

“Father...”

“Yes Ari?”

“Please stop the act. Rion is my husband now, you know.”

Unable to just continue watching Ariel had introduced Rion.

“...I refuse to recognize this.”

“It is done already, whether you give your blessing or not.”

“Marriage is a serious matter that should be approved by parents.”

“We are not father and child anymore. I do not need your permission.”

“...For my lovely Ari to say these things. How cruel... This is all your fault!”

“Eh? My fault?”

“Who else do I blame? If only... If only...! Vincent and you never met!”

“That’s...”

These words hurt Rion more than anything. If only he hadn’t met Vincent, the young lord wouldn’t have to die. That was something he thought too.

“I didn’t mind him remaining the fool he was... Not becoming the ideal aristocrat... As long as he was alive...”

“...My sincere apologies, sir.”

“Bastards like you...!”

Lord Marquess drew his sword raising it high into the air. Seeing that the women around them started to flee screaming and Rion’s subordinates scrambled to restrain him only to be signaled to stay back.

There was no need to do anything. Ariel was in front of Rion protecting him, Lord Marquess would never dare to use the blade.

Furthermore, his wife slowly moved between them.

“Hush, dear. Vincent found his happiness in the end.”

“...But... To die at such a young age...”

“Even so, he was happy. We did both hear his last words, didn’t we.”

“...”

Vincent’s parents were present at the execution. They wanted to witness their son in his last moments, no matter how hard and painful it would be for them.

“Are you really going to hurt our son’s dearest friend? Slay the person he entrusted Ariel to?”

“...No, I am not.”

Under his wife’s persuasion Lord Marquess lowered the sword. Marchioness looked into her husband’s eyes for a while and then turned to Rion. Her gaze was both gentle and stern.

“Rion.”

“Madame?”

“You need to know that I am very grateful to you. You also need to know I resent you as deeply as I am thankful.”

Although this sounded like a contradiction, those were the honest feelings of the Marchioness. Feelings her husband shared. Grateful to him for saving Ariel, loathing him for causing Vincent to die, brought to tears seeing him try to save their son – all that was true at the same time.

“...I understand, madame.”

“I do not think we will get to see each other ever again, but I have something to tell

you before we part ways. Do heed my words.”

“What would that be?”

“My daughter was entrusted to you, so I will never forgive you if you let Ari die. I will never let you off if you die before her either. For letting my son be taken from us, you have the responsibility to ensure at least this much.”

“...Here and now, I solemnly vow this.”

The responsibility that Marchioness put on him was a tremendously heavy one. It was more than just protecting her with his life on the line. But Rion could only make an oath in affirmation.

“Boss!”

Ain’s voice could be heard and Rion knew why did he sound the warning. Many women could be heard screaming, the city watch was bound to investigate.

“I am sorry, but it seems the guards are on the way.”

“Then it is time for us. Ariel. Be well my daughter.”

“Yes. Mother. You and Father as well.”

Lord Marquess was completely dejected. Perhaps he was hiding his tears by bowing his head down, but as one would expect he raised his face.

“Ari. May you find happiness.”

“I already have, Father.”

“I see... And for you, bastard...”

“Sir?”

“I will have you hold onto this.”

There was a sword in Lord Windhill’s extended hand, the same one he drew earlier on, now sheathed in its scabbard. Rion knew this blade very well.

“This is... Lord Vincent’s sword...”

“This is not for you, bastard. You will keep it safe for my daughter’s child.”

The aristocrat was too stubborn to give him the blade directly or admit the child would be his as well.

“I understand, sir.”

Although Rion accepted it gratefully, if someone were to observe his thoughts, they would notice great hesitation.

【Sword of the Windwall】. A blade passed down from one head of the House Windhill to the next. Having it was understood to be a proof one was the leader of the family.

It was unclear what Lord Marquess was thinking by lending it to Rion while indicating it belonged to his future grandson.

Ariel’s parents left immediately after that. Before the guards arrived all the courtesans gathered again so proper excuses could be offered for disturbing the peace.

They ended up being scolded for fooling around in the morning. In the meantime, Rion and Ariel left the capital being seen off by the dwellers of the slums.



Many people came to see off Ariel and Rion that day but not all of them did so with good intentions.

“...Ariel.”

“...Mhm.”

With just this, the two of them were of one mind. Without a single word, just by hearing strangers make a ruckus around them they figured out that something unusual was afoot. Rion’s voice was just a signal.

Suddenly, they were under assault from water blades flying in from all directions. But

all of those were deflected by a tornado that formed around the couple.

Of course, the assailants wouldn't give up with just that. If long-range attacks wouldn't work, it was natural to reveal themselves and close the distance.

However, as soon as they did that, they found themselves under attack from a dragon.

"Defensive formations! Cast 'Water Wall'!"

Because the opponents were clearly experienced in battle, they organized quickly and formed a wall of water in front of them. It was a product of a coordinated effort of many spellcasters and as such its strength was considerable making it hard to break. Nevertheless, the fire dragon, as if to mock that effort, simply evaded the obstacle and attacked the people behind it.

"I-Impossible!"

It was natural for them to be surprised. A spell, once deployed, was impossible to control. The effects of combat magic should follow a predictable trajectory. This was common sense.

However, the magic that Rion deployed, simply avoided the obstacle before it as if it had a will of its own.

This exposed the biggest flaw of this world's magic system. Everyone practicing it assumed they were borrowing strength from the roots of the world, they never expected or noticed that this source had its own will.

Despite being surprised they still managed to erect other barriers while the dragon devoured one of their number. After all, they were the special forces of the Aqusmea House, a magic squad that was placed among the elite of the country. They had enough skill to deal with surprise attacks of this level.

However, even if the formation they belonged to was elite, it wasn't as if all of them were first-class too. The mages fighting here were clearly young and none of them could be called the best.

The truth is, this was as much resistance as they could offer.

"He's coming! Draw your swords!"

Rion plunged into the group of assailants with an astonishing speed. Trying to intercept him they started to draw their weapons.

However, they were not able to fight on their own terms. If they tried to close into melee outside of the protection of their overlapping barriers, they would be attacked with magic. To make him fight them hand-to-hand, they would have to spread themselves, and their shields, apart.

“Scatter! We are at disadvantage bunched up!”

But a number of them fell by the time they realized that and they failed to notice they were no longer capable of such a maneuver.

As they tried to scatter, some of them were devoured by the dragon, others pierced by lances of water and the rest met Rion’s blade.

Their numbers kept dwindling. Complete annihilation was now just a matter of time.

One of those still alive, seeing his comrades being cut down like grass, was on the verge of tears.

“Is that even a human? He’s capable of deploying two different attributes!? And how can he do all this while fighting with his sword?”

“Should I tell you, I wonder?”

“Hii~!”

The dazed attacker was surprised by the sudden voice from behind. When he looked back he saw a person, that shouldn’t be there, looking at him.

“Ariel?”

“Oh, so you knew well who you were targeting, just as I thought. From your spells, you should be a minion of Aquasmeas and given your age... It’s Lancelot’s doing, eh?”

“...How?”

Giving a response without even trying to deny, this showed just how green those mages were.

“Your seniors are elites under direct command of your Lord, an unquestionable future of the country. You, on the other hand, are clearly inexperienced, apprentices at most, the marquess would never send someone like you to do his dirty work.”

“Is that so...”

“But this also makes you a minion of my brother’s enemy, correct?”

Ariel’s words, filled with bloodlust, made the man tremble.

“So even if just a little, I’ll have you feel the pain my brother did.”

“Aaaaaaaaaaagh!”

Suddenly, the wind around the man materialized into a swarm of very sharp objects and started to gradually contract, cutting the body into ribbons. His agonized death cry was carried into the sky.

By the time Ariel left, the corpse was no longer recognizable as human, all that remained was just a lump of meat. And even that was soon fated to end up in a scavenger’s stomach.

The attackers killed by Rion were bound to suffer the same fate. Their remains were left lying scorched on the ground.

The assailants were wiped out to a man and not even a corpse would remain to tell of their fate.

After all, neither Rion nor Ariel stopped hating them. Especially Ariel, for her they were the people responsible for Vincent’s death.



One month had passed since Rion’s departure. Maria’s circle, as usual, kept meeting in the Lounge. Those days people attending these gatherings were habitually called her followers.

And today they met again as usual, although an uneasy atmosphere permeated the room.

Normally, this sort of mood would be dispelled by Lancelot but even he was making a difficult face right now.

And it wasn't the first time, he was like this for a few days now.

Lancelot was losing his nerve. The assassination squad that he sent after Rion had neither came back nor contacted him since then. As one would expect, he understood by this point that they had failed but he could not comprehend why none of them made it back. With him behaving like this all day, the details of this matter became known in his surroundings. Members of his House were able to figure out that something was up and before long it became clear for them he failed at assassination.

With this, Lancelot had failed twice already.

Although his talent was worthy of an heir, it was not as if his position was rock solid. There are many cases in the past when those who excelled at magic became simple tools of war in the hands of someone more skilled at governance.

He had long known the best method to protect his position, though. The Crown Prince was the key. He looked at Arnold that seemed to enjoy a conversation with Maria.

Frankly, this kind of development was getting on his nerves. But even so, he couldn't afford to destroy his relationship with Arnold. After all, he was still bound to become the next king.

Erwin, like Lancelot, also had a frown on his face. Recently, he overheard some rumors circulating among the maids in the mansion.

Those not only suggested his mother had a longstanding affair with Viscount Austin but also said he was the fruit of that relationship.

He knew that was unfounded nonsense, of course. Still, the rumor's mere existence gave him unpleasant feelings.

During the [Trial Ceremony], he had shown an ability worthy of being the next head of the House. There was no reason to suspect he was an illegitimate child of a vassal. And yet he could not calm the disquiet in his heart.

During the execution he was told his abilities paled compared with Ariel's and were even weaker than Vincent's. He knew that could only be nonsense, a crude

provocation. However, his magic was completely ineffective against that man's magic, he couldn't do anything against someone from the slums.

So, was his aptitude really exceptional? He couldn't stop himself from thinking all these unnecessary thoughts. He didn't also know it caused darkness to creep into his heart, like a drop of ink falling into a clear water.

Why was Viscount Austin visiting his mother so often? Although he knew it could not be possible, he couldn't shake off that question.

The position of the heir was finally his. He had not even the slightest intention of letting it slip from his hands. No, that was wrong. He had the blood of Windhills flowing in his veins and he had displayed an ability worthy of being the next lord.

His thoughts might be in disarray but he was sure he would never give up his position.

Charlotte, the final aristocrat in the group, was sitting at a separate table looking displeased. Not because something bad happened to her. Rather, if one was to ask, something good happened.

Recently she was summoned by Rion who was supposed to be in the royal prison. Feeling anxious about what he might have her do this time, she nevertheless went to the meeting place. It was the same restaurant in the back alley where she had met him before so many times.

But this time there was a stranger awaiting her with a pile of papers. Rion called her here while entrusting the documents to that man. Unsure why, she took first few pages to read.

She almost fainted on the spot. The pages contained very detailed information about the chastisements of Maria she initiated. The reports were true to the fact as if Rion was actually present on the spot.

Charlotte immediately understood that he must indeed have watched the whole thing and that her actions were exposed to Rion long ago. Just thinking of what would happen if these papers were to end up in the hands of the wrong person brought chills to her spine.

With this Rion had handed Charlotte all the evidence that would've been fatal to her. That made her doubt his real intentions, so she asked the stranger only to be told that

it looked like those were not necessary anymore.

Vincent had died. Ariel had become a slave. She understood that there were no more reasons for Rion to threaten her any longer. Nevertheless, she felt admiration towards Rion for honestly handing them over to her.

She was now certain that if they met under different circumstances she might be friends not only with him but also with Ariel and Vincent. That realization brought pain to her heart.

She no longer had that choice. And even if they met under different circumstances, she would probably still choose Arnold over them.

Although currently, even though she was close by his side, all she felt was irritation. Still, she was resolved to stay here, otherwise what justification could she have for bringing ruin to the Windhill siblings.

Although their intentions were different, they were still moving in the same direction.

With this, the Royal Academy story arc ended but the story was still only half complete. The strategy arc was yet to be completed. The world had no intentions of letting the crucial characters deviate from its plan.



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